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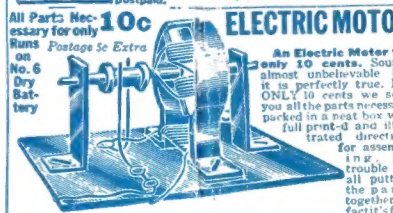

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—And—

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Cover Painting by Walter Baumhofer

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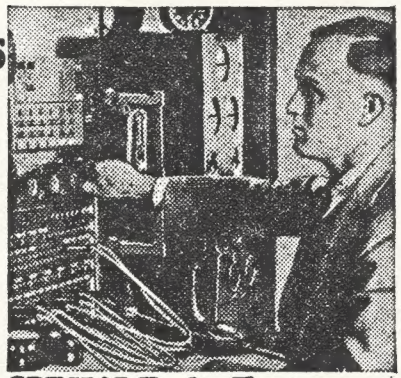

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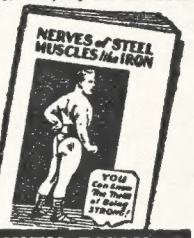

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GUN-HARVEST

GAUNT, stooped, limping, the old man came to Porphery with first snow. The Seven-Up Saloon was warm and sociable, the night drifted in on the tail of a screaming wind. Gray Wolf, he called himself—and a gray wolf he looked with his long grizzled hair, his beetling brows, his bushy, cow-licked whiskers.

Warmed up, he slid to the bar to drain a half-emptied glass. Later he was at the lunch counter, snatching at leavings. Observing which, Silver Snell—one of the owners—started over to bounce him. His partner, Duffy Shea, interfered.

"I'll handle the old duffer, Silver."

"Handle his kind with a pick handle," growled Snell.

"Don't forget, Silver, we'll all be old some time."

Easy-natured, Duffy Shea fed the oldster, treated him human, bedded him down in the barrel room and gave him a job swamping out.

Time dragged along. And then, one frosty morning the partners came to the Seven-Up and found the safe blown. Five thousand dollars and four of Shea's thoroughbred saddlers were gone. So was Gray Wolf.

"See," taunted Silver Snell. "Here's pay-off for sentimental slobber."

"We'll go after him," announced Shea, grimly. "But there's something queer . . . ."

"There won't be nothin' queer," put in Sheriff Fenton, who had been called in, "to the slug I put through Gray Wolf."

In the snow the trail was easy to follow. It led up Bearberry, along the Wildhorse Trail to Panther Flats, where the posse heard a shot. Two more followed close on the first—then a volley. Minutes later they stumbled onto the body of a burly, black-bearded man with a bullet through his neck.

"I can't understand this," murmured Duffy Shea.

"I can," sneered his partner. "The old coot called in his pards to clean us. Now they're fightin' over the loot."

"Shut up an' ride!" ordered the sheriff.

Rounding a turn in a canyon, they had a momentary glimpse of Gray Wolf. He was afoot. "Off horse!" bawled Sheriff Fenton, "an' comb him out!" They complied, darting ahead. Where the trail crossed the creek, they found another dead man.

Now another rattle of guns woke the echoes. The posse rushed toward it, found themselves in a blind canyon filled with huge boulders. A zig-zag trail, the only outlet, could be easily covered from below. Duffy Shea's thoroughbreds stood huddled there . . . . and two other horses. Human voices echoed hollowly:

"Solo!" It was Gray Wolf talking. "For years I treated yuh white, overlookin' yore disloyalty. You paid me with a shot in the back, left me fer dead. But I'm tough, Solo. Injuns nursed me alive. I figgered tuh let yuh keep what yuh'd stole by a yella coyote trick. Till yuh struck at the man that give me a chance—Duffy Shea. That finished yuh, snake. Come out a'shootin' or I'll smoke yuh out. . . ."

"Come git me!" hollered Solo.

"On the shoot!" barked Gray Wolf, and his gun commenced talking.

When the posse reached them, Solo was dead, crumpled over the Seven-Up loot. Gray Wolf was wounded but plenty alive. Sheriff Fenton, a square lawman, fixed the old codger up, sent him to town, where they hailed him as a hero. Though Gray Wolf took down part of the reward for the Stormy Mountain Gang, he still swamps in the Seven-Up by choice. Duffy Shea is his god. Men speak respectfully now for behind the stoop, the limp, the unkempt whiskers, they sense the heart of Gray Wolf, the courage that drove him through hell for his friend.

—TRAIL RIDER.

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RENEGADE

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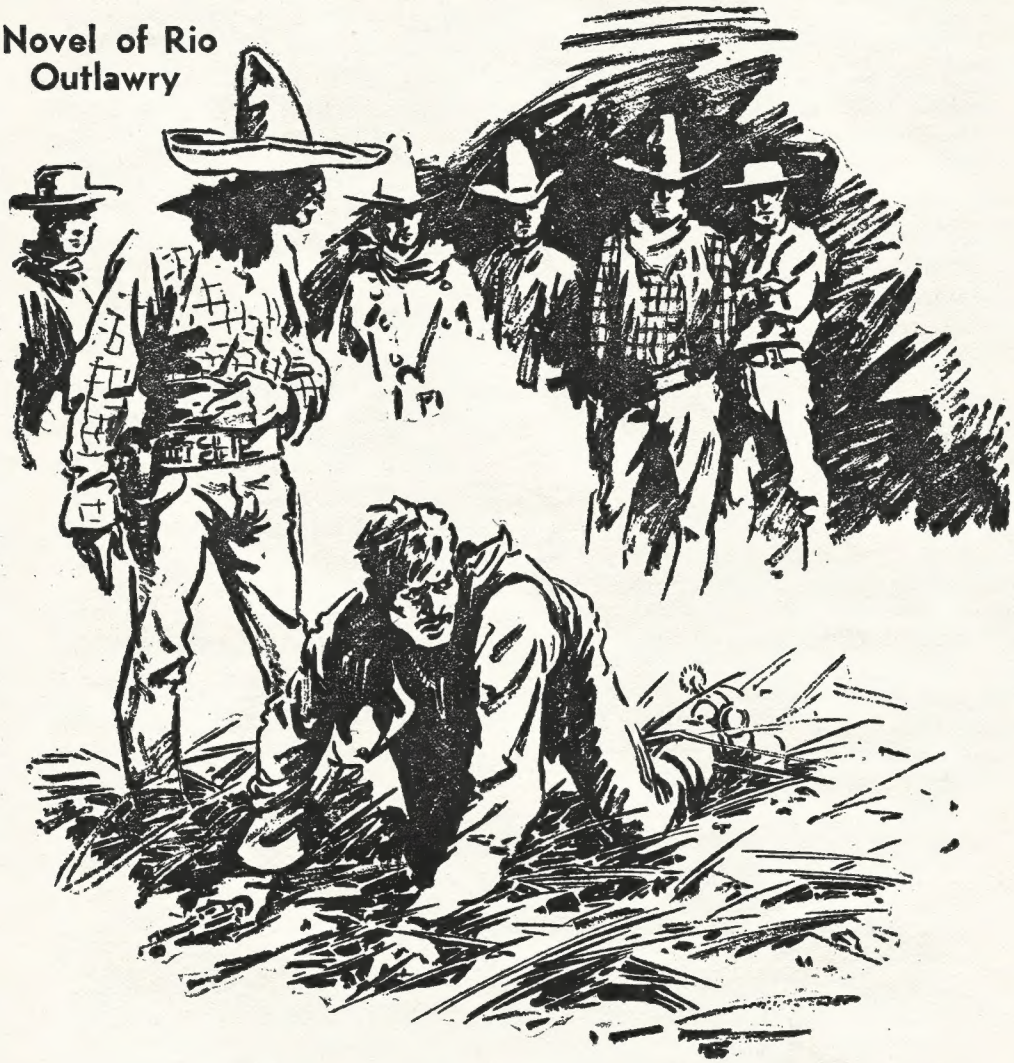

Bill Poe, to help a friend, ambled all his future hopes on a blind bet—chanced exile to the grim heartbreak and bitter loneliness of the owlhoot trail—and even sold his freedom forever to the man that he hated most!

DOC PATTERSON finished munching a couple of cloves and a few peppermints, then wadded his cheek with tobacco. He didn't want his daughter Pat to know about that half-empty pint he had hidden in the box stall. Pat was out there in the arena now, doing her trick roping and riding for the applause of the spectators in the grandstand. Pat Patterson was a champion and a real one. She was a cinch to win the women's relay this year at the Calgary Stampede. This was the last day of the show so Doc was doing

LAW

by Walt Coburn
(Author of "Black Outlaw," etc.)

a little celebrating in the barn.

He whittled a stick and fought back the desire to take another nip. He was a small man with bowed legs and a billy-goat beard as white as snow. His skin was as brown and tough as saddle leather, his puckered eyes a twinkling blue, and his drawling voice was soft and easy. Though he had never gone to college, he was as good a veterinary as a man could find anywhere. He knew horses. Proof of the fact was evident. He had just sold a man a relay horse than wasn't worth two bits. The horse had a bad front leg that would go lame even in a fast quarter mile. He had picked up a bad fall at Miles City when Pat Patterson was riding him in the relay race there. Doc had apparently fixed up that left front leg but he knew that the horse would always be lame. He hadn't told Pat. Pat thought a lot of that bay gelding. She had broken him, trained him, babied him. Pat had cried when the bay she called Big Enough had hurt that leg. She hadn't thought of her broken arm,

her bruised face. She had cried, her good arm around the neck of the crippled horse. And Doc had comforted her, promising to make Big Enough as fit as ever. Pat had a lot of confidence in Doc. He'd lied to her because he hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings.

He hated to meet her when she showed up at the barn. He'd have to explain that empty box stall. In the pocket of his Levi overalls was nine hundred dollars in cash. That's what he'd gotten for Big Enough. Big Enough had sold to Laredo Jamison, champion roper. Jamison was making good money this year and wanted top horses. Big Enough, before that pile-up at Miles City, was as fast and smart a rope horse as ever a man could ask for. Laredo Jamison had come around with a pint and nine hundred in cash money. He had left the barn with Big Enough and a bill of sale signed by Doc Patterson.

Nine hundred dollars for a no-account cripple—that was horse trading. Doc's one passion was horse trading. He liked to whittle and sit on a corral or in the shade of a barn and trade horses. Down in Arizona at his ranch he had horses that he had bought for a song and would, some day, sell for a good profit, just like he had peddled Big Enough. He'd gotten nine hundred dollars for a horse that wasn't worth two-bits—and he'd outfoxed the swaggering, good looking Laredo Jamison who was rated as one of the best contestants in the rodeo game. Laredo Jamison was from Arizona. He had a ranch along the border and was supposed to be a smart man in any kind of horse or cattle deal. Doc grinned as he visioned Laredo Jamison's chagrin when he discovered the fact that he had paid nine hundred dollars for a crippled horse.

But his smile lost its triumph when Pat rode up. Dust powdered her tanned, slightly freckled face. Her curly, close-cropped, copper-colored hair was dusty. Her eyes, gray, flecked with brown, were bright. She sat her horse perfectly. Easy to look at, this small ranch girl who had ridden to fame in the rodeo game—she had a short nose and a firm little jaw and she smiled like her father. Motherless at six, she had been reared on the ranch and in the little Arizona cow-town where Doc owned the feed and livery barn. She had ridden since she could remember.

SHE stepped off her sweaty horse and jerked the saddle off as quickly as any man could have done. She took off her big buckskin-colored Stetson and slapped dust from her fringed divided skirt made of glove leather.

"We made good, Doc," she laughed. "We'll go home with the tin cups and the first money. We'll have to load out tonight if we want to make the Prescott Frontier Days contest. I have the cars ordered and all we have to do is load the horses. We'll celebrate when we get home. . . . Where's Big Enough?"

"Well, Pat, you see it was like this. I . . . well, that laig won't ever be right. He ain't worth a dime. I got nine hundred dollars from that wise-talkin' Laredo Jamison for that three-legged pony. Here's the money."

The color left Pat Patterson's face so that the freckles on her nose showed through the dust. She stood there as if her father had slapped her.

Old Doc tugged at his whiskers and put away his jackknife. He had the roll of money in his hand. He was hard put to meet the look in the eyes of his daughter.

Without a word, she took the money from him. She left her saddle there on the ground and turned her horse over to a Mexican boy who traveled with them around the rodeo circuit. Then she walked, silver spurs making music, to the stables

where the swaggering, too handsome Laredo Jamison kept his roping horses. He met her with a faint grin, his gray eyes admiring her.

"Here's your nine hundred dollars back, Laredo. I want my Big Enough horse."

"No can do, lady. He's sold. I have Doc's bill of sale in my pocket."

"Doc had no right to sell that pony. He's mine."

Laredo Jamison smoothed a slim black mustache with a gloved hand. Big, wide-shouldered, black-haired, tanned, he was the best looking, most spectacular contestant in the game. It was no secret that he made other than contest money by handling Mexican cattle. Laredo Jamison was a smooth rustler and a fast one. Handy with his fists or with a gun. Men let Laredo Jamison alone. Women ran after him. He grinned down at Pat Patterson who stood, trembling a little with emotion, holding out the money.

"Big Enough is my horse, Laredo. Here's your money."

"Big Enough belongs to me. I bought him from Doc and I'm keeping him."

"Doc had no right to sign that bill of sale."

"Then he can be sent to the pen. Canada is hard on horse thieves."

"You mean you'd. . . ."

"I'm keepin' that bay pony. If you want him back, I'll turn this bill of sale over to the law."

"I've always known what kind of a man you were, Laredo Jamison. But I didn't know you were this rotten. You get Doc drunk. You know he can't stand whiskey: it makes him do things he regrets afterwards. You go there to the barn while I'm out in the arena. You take your money and a bottle and you buy my pet horse. If the other boys here at the Stampede knew about this, they'd make hash out of you. Guy Weadick would see to it that you were barred from every contest in the country. Weadick runs this show and he'll treat me right on this. I'll see the management and. . . ."

"And tell them that your father sells me a horse that don't belong to him. A three-legged horse, at that."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I know more about horses than your horse-swapping father gives me credit for. I bought your Big Enough pet horse knowing that he was a cripple. Want him back, now?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Think it over. I like you, even if you do look like hell in an evening gown at a swell hotel like the Palliser, here in Canada. I'll make you a present of that Big Enough pony. Take him back to his box stall. Then meet me tonight at the cowboys' ball at the Palliser Hotel."

PAT PATTERSON, the crumpled money in her tanned hand, faced Laredo Jamison. Her white-lipped rage was a helpless rage. The big cowboy's thin grin was taunting, maddening. She wanted to kill him. She wanted to kick and scratch and bite him. Instead, she stood there, shaking with anger. Tears trickled down her dusty cheeks, but they were tears of hot anger, not fear. She wanted to tell him what a coward he was, what a low-down snake she knew him to be. She wanted to use the cuss words she had picked up around the ranch and Doc's barn. But her throat seemed paralyzed. There was a hard lump there that she could not get rid of.

Then, from inside the barn, there came a lazy, drawling voice, unhurried, without anger:

"If I was you, Laredo Jamison, I'd hand over that bill of sale to the lady. I'm deliverin' her horse back to her. And from here on you and me split the blankets."

Out of the barn came a man in overalls and shabby, dusty shirt and boots. His hat was black felt, brush-scarred, out of shape. His boots were rusty. He was smaller by six inches and forty pounds than Laredo Jamison. Not a fat ounce on his body, he was well made, quick on feet, tanned, blunt jawed, with hazel eyes set under brows that had been battered. His nose was too short, his mouth too wide. But his grin was infectious, and there was something about him that won the trust of any man or woman.

This was Bill Poe, partner of Laredo Jamison. There were lots of men, in and out of the contest game, who claimed that Bill Poe was a faster roper and a better rider than Laredo Jamison. Back of the bucking chutes the talk was that Laredo paid Bill Poe to lose when they were entered in the same event. Any cowboy who followed the game would tell a man that Bill Poe, in the team tying, won Laredo Jamison the money. And from Calgary to Nogales, cow country men wondered why a square man like Bill Poe ever had thrown in with a swaggering, bullying dude cowboy like Laredo Jamison. They liked Bill Poe as much as they hated and distrusted his partner.

Laredo Jamison glared at Bill Poe. "You're takin' a hell of a big bite for a man your size, Bill."

"Mebbyso," came the easy reply. "*Quien sabe?* Miss Pat, here's your Big Enough horse. Chuck that nine hundred in the grain box. I'll fetch around that bill of sale Doc made out. Now get out of sight with the pony before you see somethin' that ain't exactly fit for a lady to look at. Come on in the box stall, Laredo."

"Hang around," said Laredo Jamison to the girl. "Watch what I do to a man that tries to horn in on my play."

"I think I will hang around," said Pat, taking the halter rope from Bill Poe. "Whip him, Bill, and I'll give you the right answer to the question you asked me at Cheyenne."

"Forget that, Pat. I was lit that night —made a fool of myself. You take Big Enough and hightail it back to Doc. I'm bustin' up the pardnership between me and Laredo Jamison, and it's plumb private."

CHAPTER TWO

The White-Handled Gun

RODEO contestants will tell you about that fight between Laredo Jamison and Bill Poe. It will always remain part of rodeo history.

Bill Poe took the money that Pat Patterson held in her hand. He looked at her steadily, grinning a little.

"I'll pay off Laredo. I'll fetch you the bill of sale. Now take that pony and go back to Doc."

Other contestants were riding up. They were in a rush to get over to the hotel and clean up. Pat reluctantly led the bay gelding away. She knew that Bill Poe was tackling a dangerous man when he went up against Laredo. She knew that the odds were in favor of the bigger man. Not only that, but Laredo fought dirty, with no tactics barred when he fought. She stopped, holding the halter rope, looking back.

"Keep goin'," called Bill Poe. Pat went on. When she was out of sight, Bill Poe faced Laredo. "Here's your damned money. I'm fightin' you for that bill of sale." Cowboys gathered around as the two stood there outside the barn. "Inside is the place to settle this," said Bill Poe. "Too many lawmen around outside."

"And you got good reasons for not wanting to be arrested, haven't you, my *amigo?*"

"About as many reasons as you have, I reckon. Let's get this over with. You can keep your gun on. I might make you use it." He tossed the nine hundred dollars on the ground, then walked into the barn.

Laredo's smile was a thin sneer. He looked at the cowboys that had gathered. Fight news spreads like wildfire. "Hang around, gents, and you'll see how I make a bunch quitter out of Bill Poe." He picked up the money and shoved it in his pocket. Then he unbuckled his fancy, monogrammed chaps. From the waistband of his buckskin foxed Oregon pants showed the ivory butt of a .45. In spite of Canadian law, Laredo Jamison packed a gun. He handed it to a pock-marked half-breed Mexican who always traveled with the rope horses and bucking horses that Laredo carried around the country.

"Hold this gun for me, Mateo."

Cross-eyed, Mateo nodded. Mateo might have been twenty-five or forty-five—a mongrel breed, this Mateo who had fought with rebel armies and knew how to handle a knife or gun. He smoked marijuana cigarettes and was ugly when he got drunk. To only one man was this repulsive-looking 'breed faithful. That man was Laredo Jamison who cursed him and treated him like a dog. No man save Mateo and the swaggering Laredo knew the real cause of that fidelity.

Bill Poe unbuckled his spurs and tossed them into his hat. He handed hat and spurs to a cowboy who wished him luck.

"Trim his tail, Bill."

"I'll twist it till he bawls," said Bill Poe without any sign of bragging. "Come on, Laredo. Let's see how tough you actually are. Come and get it."

Laredo came in with a shifting, weaving style that he used when he fought with his hands.

BILL POE, crouched, took several blows on the top of his head and on his shoulders. Then he bored in with a left and right that stopped Laredo's rush. They were fighting in a box stall. More than a score of cowboys looked on. Bets were being made. Contestants, gamblers for the most part, were fishing crumpled bank notes from dust-soiled overalls.

"Have at 'im, Poe. Knock his horns off! I got a hundred on you to win. Lose me that coin and you'll have to buy me walkin' boots to get back to Arizona."

"A hundred says Laredo knocks his ears down," said one of the crowd.

"Calls that, mistah," shouted a Negro cowboy from Texas, "and shoots me another hundred of the same kind of money. Chaw his nose off, Mistah Poe! Twist a laig off 'im. Niggah Ben's rubbin' his rabbit foot till the hair's nigh wore off."

Bill Poe ducked again, then tore in with both hands, rushing Laredo backwards, off balance. A looping left sent Laredo to his knees. Even men who had bet on Laredo were cheering. Bill Poe danced back, not taking the advantage of rough and tumble fighting to kick the fallen man.

Laredo, his mouth bleeding, was on his feet again. Twisting, weaving, he carried the fight, beating Poe into a corner, swinging hard lefts and rights. Poe covered, taking most of the blows on his shoulders. Then Laredo whipped in a low blow that made Poe double up. Laredo's left dropped Poe. With a snarl, the bigger man kicked at Poe's face. The high heel of the boot ripped across Poe's cheek as he rolled over, then Poe dove at Laredo's legs in a blind tackle. The two men rolled over and over, hitting, tearing at each other. The straw on the floor of the box stall half buried them. The straw dust choked the fighters.

Doc Patterson, tipsy, a little unsteady

on his feet, was pushing through the crowd. Pat Patterson was already there. White faced, her hands clenched, she watched the two men fight.

Laredo was hammering Poe as they staggered to their feet. Poe was getting the worst of it.

The pock-marked Mateo had just bet fifty dollars with Nigger Ben. Nigger Ben was rubbing his rabbit's foot. Perhaps the fastest bulldogger in the world, that big, grinning black cowboy from Texas who had been born and raised on the Poe ranch.

"And iffen you don't pay me, mistah greasah, I'll ca've it offen yo' pock-mahked hide. Nevah did like Laredo Jamison. Nevah will. Don't like his frien's. Don't like Mexicans nohow. Go in an' rip that high-toned cow thief's inna'ds out, Mistah Bill. Poe folks is fightin' folks. Bet my saddle and my two hosses that Mistah Bill Poe jest nacherlly pulls 'at fancy man apaht."

Pat Patterson, standing alongside the giant black cowboy, gripped his arm. Bill Poe was getting a whipping. Nigger Ben looked down at her, white eyeballs rolling.

"Don' worry, Miss Pattahson. You ain' nevah see Mistah Bill Poe git goin'. Lookit! Ain' I said he was. . . . Pull 'im plumb apaht! Lookit! Lawd Amighty, kin 'at man fight!"

Bill Poe, battered, bloody, cornered, had suddenly torn in with two fists that couldn't miss. Those fists were rocking Laredo off balance, battering him, beating him backwards as he tried in vain to cover up. The sneering grin was wiped off Laredo's face with a smear of blood. Bill Poe, spiting blood, bored in with terrific punches.

Laredo went down—down in the scattered straw. As he dropped on all fours, his right hand closed over the white butt of the gun that the wily, pock-marked Mateo had dropped there.

THERE was a gasp from Pat Patterson. Then, even as the white-handled gun was pulled out of the straw, Bill Poe kicked the weapon out of the other man's hand, and a huge black fist crashed into the yellow, pock-marked face of Mateo. Then Nigger Ben was in the box stall, his thick arms locked around Bill Poe. Bill Poe, his battered eyes glittering, fought in vain to break loose from the black giant's grip.

"Damn you, Ben, let me at him. I'll kill 'im."

The men who dragged the cursing Laredo outside were not handling him easily.

"Take that Mexican," said the Stampede manager to Laredo, "and get out of Calgary. It's skunks like you that hurt the contest game. If you're in town tonight, you'll get jailed. I'll send you that fancy gun when you get home."

"Don' let 'at cockeyed greaser 'breed git away without he pay me. Mistah Weadick," grinned Nigger Ben.

Guy Weadick, manager of the Calgary Stampede, nodded. "You'll get paid off, Ben."

Bill Poe, more calm now, spoke to Weadick. "Laredo has a paper in his pocket. It's a bill of sale for a horse that belongs to Miss Patterson. That paper goes back to her."

"It sure does, Poe. I'll get it."

"Let me ask him for it, Guy. I fought him for it and I won it. Bring him back in here."

Laredo was jerked back inside the barn. Bill Poe faced him. "I whipped you, Laredo. Give me that bill of sale for the Big Enough pony."

"You know what this will cost you, Poe."

"I'll take a chance on that. Hand over that bill of sale."

Laredo Jamison surrendered the bill of sale. Bill Poe handed it to Pat Patterson who stood, a queer look on her face, beside the now sobered Doc.

"Thanks, Bill," she said in a low tone. "Doc is going on with the horses. I want you to take me to the cowboys' ball at the Palliser Hotel tonight. You've been more than a friend, pardner."

And there in front of the crowd Pat Patterson kissed Bill Poe, carrying away a smudge of Bill's dusty blood on her mouth. She and Doc pushed through the crowd. Nigger Ben followed Bill Poe down the line of stalls, into the stall where Bill Poe kept his rope horse. Bill washed off with a bucket of water and a sponge that smelled of horse. One eye was almost closed and was a greenish black. He grinned at the big Negro bulldogger.

"Great life, Ben."

"Yes, *suh!* Mistah Bill, what 'at Laredo got on you?"

"A little pasear I made into Mexico once?"

"Figgahed so. Listen, Mistah Bill, lemme handle 'at snake. You got no business messin' aroun' wid white trash. You jest go 'long like you wishes. Niggah Ben 'tend to stompin' on snakes. You go along now to 'at hig ho-tel an' git cleaned up. Niggah Ben look aftah things heah. Mistah Laredo Snake or Mistah Pock-mark Skunk mess wid me or you, Niggah Ben Poe take care of 'em."

Nigger Ben Poe had taken the name of Poe, or rather his parents had named him after the Poe family. He and Bill Poe were about the same age. They had been raised together down in Texas. Nigger Ben's father had fought alongside Bill Poe's father in the bloody range war that had orphaned Bill Poe and had outlawed him from that part of Texas. Ben's folks had helped raise Bill Poe. And Nigger Ben would fight to the death for Bill.

"Go 'long," insisted Nigger Ben. "Lemme handle things. Miss Pattahson is sho' waitin' fo' you. Ah'll see Mistah Doc gets 'em hosses all loaded. Miss Pattahson is sho' a mighty fine lady. She's real folks. Yes, *suh!*"

"You leavin' tonight, Ben?" asked Bill Poe, his bruised face red.

"Goes wid the hosses to Prescott. I taken care of the hosses—me an' Mistah Doc Pattahson. You-all ketch us along de line. Have a good time at 'is heah cowboy ball."

"I'll be on the train when it pulls out early in the mornin', Ben. Keep Doc sober till the train leaves. And watch out for Laredo and Mateo. They'll be on the prod, maybe."

"Got me a knife an' got me a gun," chuckled the black giant. "Got me two fists an' some teeth to chaw wid. You-all go along an' fo'get about things. Git a hunk of raw beef meat on 'at left eye. Wins me money on 'is heah trip. Day money twice, an' fust in 'em finals besides what I collect on you fightin'. Gits me a bottle of gin an' wins me some mo' this night wid a paiah of dice that nevah tuhn down Niggah Ben."

CHAPTER THREE

Ley Del Fuego

LAREDO JAMISON and Bill Poe had split up. That news carried from Calgary, Canada to the Mexican border country where it was more than just news. "Bill Poe can't do that," growled a heavy shouldered, paunchy man as he filled his glass with tequila. This was "Fat" Fox, gambler, cowman, mine owner. It was generally understood that Fat Fox backed Laredo Jamison.

"Here's the wire that I got from Calgary, boss," said the saloon man. Fat Fox owned the place as well as several

gambling houses and road-houses along the Border.

Fox read the lengthy telegram that had been sent by a gambler in Canada who played in with Fat Fox on race horse deals. The heavy-jowled, brick-red face of Fox purpled. His thick hand crushed the paper. He stood there, pale, close-set eyes congested. He had a bulldog face, cruel, greenish eyes and was bald, save for a fringe of gray hair underneath the wide brim of his big Stetson. He wore overalls and a flannel shirt and brush-jumper. His boots were the best that could be made. His wealth ran into millions and his power, so it was claimed, reached from Washington, D. C., to the City of Mexico.

"Bill Poe can't quit," he repeated, and took his tequila with lemon and salt. "Damn him, he can't split with Laredo. I need 'em both in my business. Who the hell does Bill Poe think he is? If he ever crosses the Mexican border I can have him stood up against the wall and shot. Damn Poe."

"Maybe it was Laredo's fault. Read that wire over careful, boss. It mentions Doc Patterson's girl."

Fat Fox spent five minutes drinking tequila and cursing Laredo Jamison and Bill Poe and Pat Patterson.

"You heard me tell Laredo that if ever he got tangled up with any more women, I'd fire him and smash him. No place in his game for women. Women talk. Damn Laredo. Damn Poe. They can't split up like that over a woman."

"But they have, boss. Bill Poe took Laredo to a cleanin' and that's just the start of it. Laredo will get back at Poe. He'll kill him when the sign is right. He's scared of Poe."

Fox laughed shortly. "Laredo afraid of Bill Poe? Better start smokin' another brand of hop. Laredo can whip a room full of men like Bill Poe. That's why I hired him. That's why I backed him down here in Mexico. Laredo is as fast a man with his fists or a gun as ever I saw. Laredo Jamison is tough."

"So is Bill Poe. So is Nigger Ben."

"Where does Nigger Ben figure in this?"

"Fox," said the big man behind the bar, "I punched cows for the Poe outfit, I know Bill Poe and I know Nigger Ben. Bill Poe is just as square and game as his old man was, down in Texas. Nigger Ben has killed more men along the border than he can count. Laredo Jamison might be as tough as you say he is, but he's scared of Bill Poe. Just like that pock-marked Mateo is scared of Nigger Ben. Where Bill Poe goes, Nigger Ben will go. And they'll make it tough for Laredo Jamison and Mateo. I ain't askin' you to take my word for it. Just watch what happens when Laredo comes back to Mexico and starts handlin' wet cattle. See what happens."

"For a broken-down cowpuncher that spends his time behind the bar drinkin' up the profits, you're wise as hell."

"You staked me to this saloon, Fox, and I run it accordin' to your orders. You sprung me out of the *cuartel* in Mexico when they had me booked to be shot. I take your orders. I buy drinks for men that might talk words that mean somethin'. A man on this side of the bar hears plenty. What I hear I pass on to you. Whenever I give you a bum steer, I'll take off my bar apron and quit. I say Laredo Jamison has a yellow streak and that he'd double cross his own grandmother, if he ever had one."

Fat Fox looked hard at the ex-cowpuncher behind the bar. Then he took another drink of tequila with lemon and salt. There was a queer sort of grin on his freshly-barbered, heavy-jowled face.

"Laredo had a grandmother, all right. You might be right about him being a

coward. I've never seen him show any yellow yet—and he's been in some tight spots. He saved my life twice. The first time he had to kill a Texas ranger and a cowboy. The second time he killed three Mexicans. It cost me plenty to clear him both times, but it was worth it. I'll place my bets on Laredo Jamison."

The man behind the bar shrugged his shoulders. "My money is on Bill Poe. I don't like Laredo. Never did cotton to his ways. To me he's a snake."

Fat Fox's grin was almost a sneer. "Laredo might trim your wick if word got back to him you'd talked like this."

"Nobody heard it but you, boss. I'll take a chance on you doin' any talkin'. You're too smart for that. Have one on the house."

Fat Fox poured himself another tequila. "I don't talk to any man. A man makes more money and lives longer if he listens to the other gent talk. Here's how."

When Fox had left the saloon the raw-boned bartender washed and wiped his own glass. Then he took Fox's glass and broke it in the big cuspidor. To break a glass like that is an insult to the man who used it. The rugged-featured face of the saloon man was grim hard. It was a scarred face, the face of a Texan born of an ancestry of mountaineers back in Kentucky, of men who had fought in Texas against Mexico. This man with the scarred face and a leg crippled by gunfire was a son of a feud clan. Here in Mexico nobody knew his name. Fox and everybody who came to the saloon just south of the Border called him Brazos. Like every man Fat Fox hired, this tall, dark-complexioned, hawk-nosed Texican was tough.

Brazos spat at the broken glass in the cuspidor, then poured out what was left in the tequila bottle. Brazos hated Fox—hated him with that smoldering hatred that is typical of his feudist breed. Fox could turn him back to the Mexican government any time. Even now, in this little Mexican town, Brazos was a prisoner, a prisoner under the *ley del fuega*. Let him try to get back across the Border and he would be killed, shot down. Fox liked to hire men over whom he could hold such a power. Brazos—Laredo—Bill Poe. . . .

FEW men had ever crossed Fat Fox. Those who had tried it had met with bad luck. Bill Poe was trying it now. Bill Poe was breaking with Laredo Jamison and that meant breaking with Fox. Fox had ways of smashing men.

Bill Poe saw Fox in his box at the Prescott Frontier Days show. Fox had half a dozen bucking horses entered. Though he took no active part in the show, he had horses and men entered and had brought half a dozen guests for the week. There was a Mexican official from below the Border with him, a New York banker and his young wife, a big, handsome looking athlete who was making a name for himself, a Mexican actress. The iced drinks served from big jugs held stronger stuff than lemonade.

Laredo Jamison joined them in the box. He wore some of the marks of the beating he had taken from Bill Poe. But in spite of that he was still the handsome, swaggering cowboy. Bill Poe, in overalls and dust-covered shirt and hat, was over at the chutes. He had drawn a hard horse in the bucking. His rope horse had seemed slow in the early morning when he had tried him out. Doc Patterson had located a jug last night and was sleeping it off. Pat Patterson looked more than a little worried when she met Bill Poe at the chutes.

"Bill," she came directly to the point, "I want to ask you a question."

"Shoot it, pardner."

"You and Laredo were sort of in partnership, weren't you?"

"Sort of, Pat."

"Were you working for Fat Fox?"

"What if we were? What's on your mind, pardner?"

"I saw you meet Fox there at the headquarters when you were drawing for your bucking horses. I didn't mean to be eavesdropping but I couldn't help hearing Fox say that if you didn't work with Laredo across the Border, he'd give you a one-way ticket to Hell."

"And mebbyso you overheard what I told Fox?"

"Yes. You told him enough. Gosh, Bill, I got you into all this. Fox don't run bluffs. Why don't you patch it up some way with him and Laredo?"

Bill Poe looked at her, his eyes reading hers. Then he shook his head and reached for tobacco and papers. "I don't like Laredo Jamison. I don't like Fat Fox. I don't like the game I've played with 'em. I'm drawing out of their dirty game. You didn't get me into this. It's been comin' on for a long time. War's declared." He grinned and lit his cigarette.

"Bill, they got Doc drunk last night. Doc has been father and mother to me since I can remember."

"You've been a mother to him, Pat. Doc is not to blame for what he does, sometimes. He broke down and cried like a kid when I gave you back the bill of sale for Big Enough. Why, shucks, he's just a natural born horse trader. What if he does take a few drinks? No harm done."

"Please, Bill, don't grin like that. I . . . Doc slipped away last night. Some of Fox's gamblers and bootleggers got him in a poker game. . . ."

"And trimmed Doc?"

"He lost the ranch, the livery barn, even the horses. Yes, they trimmed him. Laredo owns the whole works now. Laredo or Fat Fox. They're letting me keep my relay string until after the show is over the fifth of July. I didn't come to you for help, Bill. I told you this because you'll find out, anyhow. I want you to get away from Fox before they smash you like they have smashed Doc. Please get out of the country so they can't hurt you."

Bill Poe shook his head. "I'll get back all that Doc lost, and more to boot. I don't run from Fat Fox or Laredo Jamison. Bet all you have in the bank on me in the bronc ridin' and ropin'. Lay the rest on Nigger Ben in the bulldoggin'. And if it's poker they want to play, they'll get a game. Now you quit frettin' and go on over to Doc. Get him to whittlin'. Don't let him know he's lost his shirt. Now lope along, pardner. I got work to do."

Tears showed in Pat Patterson's eyes. "Darn you, Bill Poe," she said huskily, then rode away.

The grin left Bill Poe's face. He had drawn the toughest bronc there was in the show. No man had ever made a qualified ride on the big flea-bitten gray gelding called Blizzard. Betting on that ride was a hazard and a big one. As for the roping, Bill Poe's horse was out of condition. He had told Pat Patterson to bet on him. He had promised to win back what Doc had lost.

"If ever a man over-bet his hand," he said aloud, sitting his horse with a leg thrown across the saddle horn, "I did it."

"'At ain' no way to talk," sounded a voice from inside the nearby chute. "Mistah Bill, you ride 'at bronc like he was a shetlan' pony. Knock on 'im like you owned him from ears to hocks. An' when you rope, use my Possum hoss. He'll be on top of ary calf or steer befo' they git stahted. An' tonight these heah dice wins us back all Doc loses. I know who

win from Doc. Niggah Ben git it back. Lookit yondah. Fat Fox lookin' like a big toad amongst 'em dudes. Laredo ain' look so peart. Fox musta bin layin' down law to 'im. Gits me a lettah from Mexico—from Brazos. Mistah Bill, we got to clean out 'at snake nest."

CHAPTER FOUR

Wild Ride

OVER in the grandstand the band was playing. The day was warm, filled with sunshine. Last evening's rain had settled the dust and the arena was in splendid condition, making it an ideal day for the show. But Bill Poe wasn't hearing the band. He wasn't thinking of the bright sunshine, the blue sky. He had a bronc to ride.

The big gray outlaw was hard to handle in the chute. They were having trouble with him. Bill Poe climbed the chute and let himself down in the saddle. Before he got his right stirrup the chute gate was jerked open. Blizzard came out squealing and twisting. Bill Poe, with only one stirrup, hadn't a Chinaman's chance. The third jump and he was thrown—thrown hard. He got up slowly, unsteadily. He was dizzy with pain. But he managed a grin as he picked up his hat and limped back to the chutes. He was thinking of Pat Patterson and Doc. If Pat had bet on him to win that bucking, then she'd lost. He cussed himself for a fool. Why had he told her to bet on him?

He saw Laredo Jamison over at the chutes. Laredo had drawn one of his own horses. That is, a horse entered by Fat Fox. Laredo had practiced on this Fox bronc and knew how he pitched. Laredo would put up a fancy ride. Bill Poe wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. He dreaded meeting Pat Patterson.

The band was playing again. Laredo was coming out on the Fox bronc called Ornery. Over in the box Fat Fox smiled faintly. He had bet heavily on Laredo to win day money in both the bucking and steer roping.

Laredo, as he eased himself into the saddle, grinned derisively at Bill Poe. The pock-marked Mateo was handling the chute gate. Laredo settled himself in the saddle.

"Give 'im to me," he called. The Ornery bronc came out of the chute bucking. Laredo was scratching and fanning with his hat, a grin on his face. The bronc was pitching and doing a showy job of it. Laredo was putting up a perfect ride. Over in the grandstand the crowd was cheering. Laredo was a popular contestant. That ride would be a cinch to win him day money. The timer's gun cracked. The pick-up men were alongside Laredo. He quit the saddle easily, vaulting across the horse of one of the pick-up men, slid to the ground and swaggered back to the chutes, rolling a cigarette.

Bill Poe was back of the chutes with Nigger Ben. The black giant was trying to find something to say to make Bill feel better, but he couldn't find the right words. Ben had been trying to get more money bet on the ride when Blizzard had come out of the chute. Nigger Ben had lost plenty on that ride. Most of it had been won by the pock-marked Mateo.

"Mos' likely cuts me up a Mexican," he muttered as he pulled the mane of his black rope horse, Possum. "Needs some knife practice, anyhow."

Pat Patterson found Bill Poe and Nigger Ben there behind the chutes. She tried to make her smile look genuine. "I was too late getting that money down on you, Bill," she lied. "It wouldn't have mattered, even if I did lose. I'm sorry you got piled."

"Bill Poe wanted at the judge's stand!"

called the announcer. "Bill Poe, report immediately to the judges' stand!"

Bill Poe walked over to the stand. The judges and Mike Stewart, the arena director, were talking. Mateo was there with Laredo, arguing heatedly.

"I saw it happen," said Mike Stewart. "Bill Poe didn't get his right stirrup. This Mexican jerked the gate open before Poe had a chance to get fixed in the saddle. The Mexican had no business there at the gate. I'm putting him off the grounds and disqualifying him in every event he's entered. Any more back talk from Laredo Jamison and the same goes for him. Poe, you get a re-ride on Blizzard. That's the decision of the judges."

"Bill Poe gets a re-ride on the Blizzard outlaw!" barked the announcer. "Customers, that will be givin' you back the price of admission."

Fifteen minutes later Bill Poe was again in Chute Three on top of the big gray bronc. Nigger Ben was handling the gate this time. Pat Patterson and Doc were there near the chute. Doc, still a little tipsy, Pat, her eyes misty.

"Ride 'im, Bill," she said huskily.

"All set?"

"All set," nodded Bill Poe. "He's all mine, Ben. Turn 'im out!"

BUCKING, bawling, snorting, that big outlaw came out of the chute, Bill Poe's spurs scratching from neck to flanks. The spectators were getting an exhibition of riding such as they had never before seen. The grandstand was on its feet, cheering wildly. The contestants around the chutes were yelling:

"Ride 'im, cowboy! Stay a long time!"

"Man, ain't that bronc ridin'?"

"Stay, you Bill Poe!"

Nigger Ben was yelling and jumping up and down. Old Doc yelling himself hoarse. Pat Patterson crying and laughing at the same time.

The pick-up men were too slow. Bill Poe and the big gray outlaw crashed through the fence, piling up. Men and women and children ran for the grandstand, quitting the space between the stand and the fence.

Bill Poe, badly shaken, was hanging onto the halter rope, trying to throw the bucking horse. He was being dragged and kicked. Then a black cowboy on a chunky black horse was through the fence, coming like a streak. Even as the halter rope slipped from Bill Poe's hand, Nigger Ben grabbed it, took his dallies, and snubbed the gray Blizzard bronc to a halt, directly in front of Fat Fox's box. Nigger Ben turned the gray outlaw over to the tardy pick-up men and went back to Bill Poe.

Bill, his clothes half torn off, smeared with dirt and blood, had gotten to his feet. Mike Stewart was there now—Mike, one of the best contestants in the game, had taken his share of rodeo punishment and knew that Bill Poe had been hurt.

"Sit down, Bill and take it easy. The ambulance is coming."

"Ambulance, hell. I might look skinned up but I'm still able to get around. I'm obliged for that re-ride, Mike. And if Nigger Ben does as good in the 'doggin' as he did just now, he won't lose."

Bill Poe walked across the track to the chutes. The crowd was excited, back in the stands. They had seen Bill Poe make a championship ride. They had seen Nigger Ben save people from injury or death. The band was playing. The show went on.

Fat Fox took a pencil and piece of paper. He wrote a few words on the paper, then hailed one of the ushers.

"Take this to Bill Poe, son. Don't let anybody else see it."

A doctor was administering first aid to Bill Poe. Pat Patterson and Doc were

helping. The usher handed Bill the note. It read:

> See me at the hotel after the show. It will be to your advantage. Have proposition for you. Fox.

Bill Poe shoved the note in his pocket, then grinned faintly at Nigger Ben.

"Fat has a proposition, Ben."

"Him an' Laredo jus' had a pow-wow ovah yondah. Laredo rides back lookin' like he done bit hisse'f an' got hydrophoby."

"I'm not seein' Fat Fox."

"Make it easy on yo'se'f, Mistah Bill. Don' be too proud an' haughty. Fat Fox ain' no man's fool."

"I'm through with Laredo. I'm through with Fox, Ben."

"In which case," said Nigger Ben, taking a nip from a gin bottle he had hidden behind the chutes, "you bettah staht usin' whut is called pre-caution. You got a gun. Staht packin' it, else you has dyin' notions. Fat Fox is bad medicine."

CHAPTER FIVE

Double-Cross Kill

BILL POE did not meet Fat Fox that evening. Fox left for Mexico early the next morning. With him went Laredo and the pock-marked Mateo. Fox, two-thirds drunk, took tequila like a man drinks water. He and Laredo were back in Mexico, below the line. They sat in a back room of the saloon run by the lanky Brazos. Out in front at the bar the pock-marked Mateo loafed with a vigilant eye.

"Laredo," said Fox bluntly, "I want Bill Poe back on the job. Get him."

"I'll quit first. Damn Bill Poe."

"Quit? You quit? You can't quit me. Neither can Poe. You get Poe back or I'll have your guts shot out. Poe is worth ten of you, Jamison. Nigger Ben is worth an army of yellow-hided tramps like that Mateo. You're a fool and Mateo is clumsy. You cost me plenty at the Prescott show when I bet on you. I thought you could fight. Poe whips you in Calgary. He out-rides you at Prescott. Wins first day money in the ropin'. Mateo gets kicked off the lot. Look here, Laredo, I want Poe back and I want Nigger Ben back. You got 'em to quit me. Now you get 'em back. And leave that Patterson girl alone from now on."

"Supposin' I told you that I could use her to get your damned Bill Poe back"

"How do you figure on that?"

"I didn't tell you, but I own everything Doc Patterson owns. He lost it all to a friend of mine. Nigger Ben and Bill Poe tried to win it back but this friend of mine couldn't be found. He had sort of disappeared. They couldn't locate him."

"Come clean, Jamison. What are you tryin' to pull on me? Talk turkey."

"A card playin' gent gets Doc Patterson for all he has. The tin-horn card man gets a bill of sale for the works. That bill of sale is made out to Laredo Jamison now. The card man turned it over to me. Mateo talked him into it after he had taken the notion to hold out on me. Mateo's knife cut the double-crossin' snake away from the bill of sale. I have it now. I'll use it to fetch back Bill Poe and Nigger Ben, if you think you need 'em that bad. But it will cost you money, Fox. I'll sell you that bill of sale for a fancy price—quite a fancy price."

"Name it."

"First, I want some papers you have that could send me to the pen. Then I want ten thousand dollars to take me out of the country. In return I give you back Bill Poe and Nigger Ben and throw in Doc Patterson and his layout to boot."

"Quite a trader, ain't you, Jamison? Your game don't work. I expected trou-

ble. That's why I planted Brazos in the next room. He's got you covered, Laredo. Hand over that bill of sale. If you don't, I'll have you shot where you sit."

Laredo's face looked yellow, but he managed a thin grin. His eyes were narrowed.

"You'll have to murder me, Fox. I wasn't fool enough to bring that bill of sale along. A lawyer has it in Nogales. Tell Brazos to go ahead and shoot."

The two men glared at one another. Fat Fox was rated as one of the most dangerous men along the Mexican border but he hired other men to do his fighting. He was seldom without a bodyguard. Laredo hated Fat Fox, even as he feared him. There was a sneer on Fox's red face now.

"I want that bill of sale more than I want your hide, Laredo. Fetch it here and I'll make a dicker with you. I savvy what your game is. Poe is stuck on the Patterson girl. If Doc Patterson gets back his property, Poe will come back to work. Is that the idea?"

"It's along that line." The color was coming back into Laredo's face again.

"I'll buy your bill of sale. Have it here tomorrow."

Laredo Jamison shook his head. "Pay my attorney, Ramon Nevers, at Nogales. Hand him those papers you have against me, give him cash money and the bill of sale for Doc Patterson's outfit will be turned over to you. That's the only way I'll do business. I don't trust you any more than you trust me. The lawyer will handle the deal."

Fat Fox hid his chagrin behind a thick-lipped smile. He had hoped to get that bill of sale, then have Laredo killed. The trick had been played before. Laredo had acted as killer in the past—and remembered.

"You win, Laredo. I'll deliver the money to that crooked shyster of yours tomorrow night at his office in Nogales. I'll turn over those papers to him. I'll even give you back your job."

Laredo Jamison grinned faintly. "I don't think I need the job. It might not be a healthy climate down here."

"Have it your own way."

Laredo left the back room. He and Fox walked into the bar and Brazos served them drinks. Mateo drank with them. Then Laredo and the pock-marked Mexican left the place. They rode along in silence for a mile or more, then Laredo spoke.

"What in hell were you doing while Brazos left the bar and hid in the other back room?"

"Brazos never left the bar, *amigo*."

"Then," muttered the Texan, "Fat Fox was runnin' a bluff on me when he said Brazos was in there, coverin' me. Damn his fat carcass, I'll make him pay for that."

He took a drink. His nerves needed it. That threat of death in the back room had thrown a scare into him. Laredo Jamison was afraid of death.

AT THE Prescott arena stables, Doc Patterson sat and whittled and cared for the horses. The twinkle had faded from his puckered blue eyes and when he tried to grin he made a failure of it. Doc, sobered, shaky from his tilt with moonshine, had just found out all that had happened to him.

It came about when he tried to make a horse trade with one of the men handling Fat Fox's horses. The man had laughed in his face.

"Time you come out of it, Doc, and soaked your head in the horse trough. You don't own any horses. You don't even own that barn of yours or your ranch. Fat Fox owns your outfit, lock, stock and barrel. If you don't believe me, ask Bill Poe or your own daughter.

You lost everything but your socks in a poker game. Doc, you ain't even got a cuspidor to spit in or a window to throw it out of."

Doc wasn't going to ask Pat or Bill Poe. That would take more courage than he had just now. He sat there, whittling, trying to remember about that poker game. It was all mighty hazy. He'd had a nip or two out of a bottle, then had gone down to a blind pig. He didn't remember who was with him or who had given him the nip. He remembered waking up in the same box stall with Pat's Big Enough pony. He had washed at the trough and brushed the straw out of his clothes. Doc would rather sleep in box stalls than hotels. It was nothing unusual to wake up on his tarp-covered bed in a barn with a bad taste in his mouth and a headache. But losing everything he owned in a poker game was almighty queer. Doc, save for a little penny ante or a game of seven-up for the drinks, never gambled. No, he couldn't ask Pat or Bill Poe. Still, that man who worked for Fox wasn't the joking kind. Doc knew that the man had told the truth.

Did Pat and Bill Poe know? If they did, they hid the knowledge almighty well—Pat with her laugh and her little jokes—Bill Poe with his slow grin and drawling voice.

NIGGER BEN rode up on Possum. His white teeth showed in a wide grin. He had a watermelon under one arm.

"Busts 'at 'doggin' reco'd, Mistah Doc. Busts it like me an' you bust 'is hunk uh Niggah Ben's favorite fruit."

Nigger Ben would know the truth. Doc asked him, out and out. The giant black cowboy tried to lie, bundered into failure.

"Then I'm smashed, Ben? Busted?"

"Shucks, now, Mistah Doc. No game is los' till it's plumb lost. We ain' los' yet. Iffen you-all got a bottle in de hay, take a dram. Meanstwhile Niggah Ben bust 'is melon lak I bust 'at Brahma steeah. Miss Pat gimme 'is melon. Beats all de money I wins. Shucks, Mistah Doc, don' take on lak. . . ."

Nigger Ben talked to Doc in the box stall while they ate watermelon and fed bits of it to Big Enough. Bit by bit the big Negro explained things to Doc.

They must have slipped dope in Doc's drinks, he figured. Ben and Bill Poe had done some sleuthing. If there had been a game, it was a small one for five-cent stakes. Doc had signed a paper. Perhaps he thought it was something connected with a feed bill at the show grounds.

Fox had pulled Laredo out of the contests and taken him and the pock-marked Mateo into Mexico. They had left the second morning of the show. Now Fat Fox was back in his box, back at his hotel with two hard-looking bodyguards. No sign of Laredo or the Mexican Mateo. And Fox had sent word once more that he had a very important proposition for Bill Poe. Nigger Ben had seen the note. The proposition concerned the welfare of Doc Patterson and his daughter. Pat didn't know about the note.

"Mistah Bill Poe fix everything," said Nigger Ben, spitting watermelon seeds. "Now don' you-all let on I tol' you anything. Jes' keep on whittlin'. Mistah Bill Poe an' Niggah Ben Poe handle things. Yessuh."

Few of the rodeo contestants or the people who had come to see the Prescott Frontier Days contest paid any attention to a small item in the Prescott Courier. The item came from Nogales. Briefly it mentioned the fact that an attorney-at-law named Ramon Nevers had been found shot to death in his office. Motive of the murder was thought to be the jealousy of some woman of the Border, or re-

venge of some Border renegade. Ramon Nevers, half Mexican, half English, handled a lot of shady cases. His reputation was rather bad.

In his room at the hotel Fat Fox read the item and poured himself another drink of tequila. From the pocket of his coat he took the bill of sale signed by Doc Patterson and slid it under the blotter of the writing desk. Then he walked through the bathroom into the next room where his two bodyguards sat smoking.

"I'm expecting Bill Poe," he told them. "You know what to do if there is any trouble."

IN THE hotel room, Bill Poe faced Fat Fox. Bill had ignored the big man's proffered hand. Fat Fox waved a thick hand towards an open box of Mexican cigars. "Smoke, Bill?"

"If I want a smoke, I'll roll one."

"Mebbyso you'll drink?"

"Not with you, Fox."

"Got Stetson fever, I reckon. Your hat don't fit any more. But a prison suit might look all right on you. Sit down, Poe."

"Whatever talkin' I got to do, I'll do standin', Fox. Spread out your sougans and I'll look 'em over for nits. Lay your cards on the table."

"I hold a bill of sale for everything Doc Patterson owns. Is that plain?"

"Plenty plain. Go on."

"If I clamp down on Doc Patterson, it will break him. It will set him afoot. It will set Pat Patterson afoot."

"Keep your dirty mouth off her name, Fox." Bill Poe's voice was low-pitched, almost a whisper. Without taking his eyes from Fox he stepped to the bathroom door and flung it open. Fox's two tough-looking bodyguards stood there, guns in their hands. Bill Poe grinned faintly at Fat Fox.

"Send your two watchdogs out for a walk if you want to talk to me, Fox. And you don't need to be scared of me. I won't kill you. You ain't worth it. Tell 'em to get to hell out of here and stay out or we don't talk turkey. I know 'em both. Nigger Ben is just outside. All he'd have to do is yell "boo" at these two hombres and they'd run theirselves to death. Get rid of 'em or there'll be no medicine talk. Prod 'em out, Fox."

"Come back in half an hour, boys," growled Fox thickly. When they had gone he took a stiff drink. Bill Poe eyed him coldly.

"You want me back, is that it, Fox?"

"I'll pay you good money, Poe. I want Nigger Ben back with you."

"And if we don't both go down to Mexico to handle wet cattle for you, you'll smash Doc Patterson. God, what a white man you are. All right, mister, Ben and I go back. Where's that bill of sale?"

"Where you can't get hold of it, Poe, until you sign a contract to run the Fox outfit in Mexico. Sign that agreement, take Nigger Ben back with you, play my game and some day you'll have enough to marry the . . . marry some girl and live the life of Riley. Will you sign on the dotted line?"

"Double-cross me, Fox, and I'll kill you."

"No double-cross. I need a man I can trust. You never broke your word to me or any man, so far as I know." Fat Fox played his trump card. Reaching in under the desk blotter, he took out the bill of sale.

"There you are, Poe. It's yours to do whatever you like with. Tear it up or give it to Doc Patterson. There's no hurry for you to sign that contract. I'll have my attorney draw it up. Your word is good with me. Take a drink to bind the bargain."

Bill Poe stood there, the bill of sale in his hand, his eyes watching Fat Fox.

Fox's cold, bloodshot eyes met Poe's. There was something about Fox that, despite the fact he was a crook, made men respect him.

Bill Poe filled two glasses. They drank together. Fox lit a black cigar.

"Laredo Jamison is through, Poe. I let him and Mateo go. When men double-cross me, Poe, they never win. Laredo tried it and lost. He got the worst of it. He don't like you, Poe. Watch out for him and Mateo. Good luck in the roping tomorrow. I'm bettin' on you to win. And even if it did cost me a lot, it was worth the money to see the ride you put up on that Blizzard horse."

Bill Poe left the room a little bewildered. He folded the bill of sale and put it in his pocket. He wondered how he would explain it all to Doc Patterson and Pat. It was Nigger Ben who gave him the solution to the question. Nigger Ben, squatted on spurred boot heels in the hallway of the hotel, shooting craps with two colored bellboys.

He gave Nigger Ben the bill of sale. Ben's eyes rolled in bewilderment.

"Tell Miss Pat you won it back with your dice. Make it sound natural."

"Yes, *suh!* I tell it scary, no foolin' 'bout 'at."

"And don't mention to anybody that we've hired out again to Fat Fox."

"Gawd A'mighty, Mistah Bill! We was goin' straight! You-all was goin' to git a little ranch an'. . . ."

"We're goin' back to work for Fat Fox. Laredo is out. I'm runnin' the Fox outfit in Mexico. Now take that bill of sale to Miss Pat and Doc. Then go get a bottle of gin and get drunk."

Bill Poe walked on down the hall to his room. Nigger Ben's gaze followed him. From the pocket of his dusty overalls, Nigger Ben took a rabbit's foot which he rubbed hard.

"Needs us plenty luck," he muttered, "iffen we goes back to Mexico."

Then he went to deliver the bill of sale to Pat Patterson and Doc, out at the rodeo grounds where they were getting ready to turn over their horses to the Fox outfit.

Outside the hotel he cut a pigeon wing, then swung up on his horse. His grin was wide and he sang to himself. It would be something to give that bill of sale back to Doc and Miss Pat.

"Yes, *suh!*"

CHAPTER SIX

Whetted Steel

THE four days' show at Prescott was over. That night Fat Fox gave a big banquet in a private dining room at the hotel. His guests were hand picked, men who could help him in the political world on both sides of the Border, attractive women for the bachelors. The married men brought their wives. Several of the cowboy contestants were there. Among them was Bill Poe.

That previous evening Fox had sent for Bill Poe to come to his hotel room. "I'm giving a banquet tomorrow night, Poe. I want you there. Bring the Patterson girl."

Bill had stiffened and his eyes had hardened. "I don't like banquets, Fox, and Pat Patterson wouldn't come unless she got dragged there."

"Take it easy, Poe. You're working for me now. You're under contract to take my orders. I'm telling you to show up at the banquet tomorrow night."

"I haven't signed any contract yet."

"I told you your word was good enough for me until the contract is drawn up. Be there tomorrow night. Bring the little lady if she'll come."

"She won't come. If it's orders, I'll

be there, but I'm not takin' her."

"In which case I'll have another girl on hand for you. You'll like her. Men have fought over her, down in Mexico. Laredo Jamison killed a man and crippled another on her account."

"You mean Rosita, the dancer at the big cantina at Nogales?"

"You made a good guess."

"Look here, Fox, I hired out to run your ranch below the Border, not to play the fool with Mexican dancing girls."

"When a man hires out to me, Poe, he takes what orders I give him. I'll expect you to show up tomorrow night with the Patterson girl or Rosita. I'll give you until after tomorrow's show to make your choice. That's all."

Bill Poe was white with rage when he left Fox's room. He had sold himself to Fox and the big man had him hog-tied. He dreaded meeting Pat, but he was taking her to supper tonight and couldn't get out of it. He picked her up in the lobby and they went down the street to the Chinaman's, which was a popular eating place for the contestants.

PAT was in a gay mood as she and Bill Poe went down the long, narrow old hallway to the restaurant, through a screen door and into the crowded restaurant. Bill had managed it with Tom, the Chinaman, to hold a booth—no easy task, this time of the day.

They were halted half a dozen times by friends. Bill Poe was a hundred-to-one bet to walk off with the bronc riding and calf tying. He and Nigger Ben had fallen down in the team tying because Bill's horse was off his feed and too slow. Pat had won every day in the relay race and her fancy riding and roping had won her more than usual applause.

"Just think, Bill," she said when they were alone in their booth and had ordered cold turkey and watermelon, "Ben won back that bill of sale. Gee, it's great. We'll pay him back as fast as Doc and I can make it. Until it's paid off, Ben owns the outfit. He's got a real heart."

"As good a friend as a man could ask for, Pat." He sipped his iced tea.

"Back at that table where those cowboys were, Bill, they said something about you being the new ramrod of the Fox outfit in Mexico. Of course, they were hoorawing."

Bill set down his glass of iced tea. This was the moment he had been dreading. "They were right, Pat. I'm leavin' for Mexico as soon as the show is over. I've hired out to Fat Fox."

"Oh." Pat Patterson's smile was gone. A Chinese boy brought the food and they began eating. The cold turkey was beyond reproach. The watermelon was just ripe enough. Yet they picked at their food like a pair of dyspeptics. The silence was uncomfortable. Bill Poe's tanned face was beaded with sweat in spite of the cool air from the fan that spun, propeller-like, above them.

Then the door opened and Doc Patterson came in. Doc was a little tipsy and he smelled of the barn. He closed the door behind him. He looked nervous, a little scared.

"Laredo Jamison is in town, Bill," he said in a husky whisper. "Mateo is with him. They're down at a bar on the next block, and doin' some real drinkin'. They're huntin' trouble or I can't read the sign right. I had one or two with 'em. Laredo wanted to know if I'd got back that bill of sale. He grinned almighty queer when I said I had. When I told him how Nigger Ben had won it back from them tin-horns with his dice, Laredo kind of laughed, but it was a bad laugh. Thought I'd tell you about him bein' in town."

"Thanks, Doc. I'm glad to know it."

Doc refused to join them for supper, saying he didn't believe in horning in on young folks. When he had gone, Bill Poe and Pat left. Pat said something about a headache and Bill said good night to her in the lobby. It was an awkward parting.

The next day, at the grounds, Pat avoided him and he kept away from her. Fox and his guests and his two bodyguards were in his box. The contestants rode up in turn in front of the stand to get their prizes. The crowd cheered Pat and Bill Poe and Nigger Ben and the other winners. There was no sign of Laredo Jamison or the pock-marked Mateo.

And that night, dressed in his best clothes, Bill Poe sat next to the Mexican dancer Rosita at Fat Fox's banquet.

FAT FOX liked to give banquets. But tonight he was not getting his customary enjoyment out of wining and dining a crowd of people. He had so arranged it that the head of the table, where he sat, placed him with his back against the wall. Outside, his two bodyguards lounged in their chairs—armed—because Fat Fox knew that Laredo Jamison was in town. And yesterday, down in Nogales, had been held the funeral of Ramon Nevers, attorney at law.

Bill Poe was quiet, a dull companion for the vivacious dancer Rosita. Almost any man would have been more than flattered by her company. Exotic, beautiful, with a charming voice and a willowy body that was living poetry, she was the toast of the Border towns where she sang her songs of Mexico and danced. She worked for Fox in his cantinas. Men had fought for her smiles—men had died on her account. Men such as Laredo Jamison had killed for her below the Border. Down along the Border they said that Rosita and Laredo loved one another. But both were pawns in the powerful hands of Fat Fox who owned the bodies and souls of men and women.

Perhaps Fox had brought Rosita here tonight as a gesture of hate and contempt for Laredo. Knowing that Pat Patterson would not come to his banquet, he had paired Rosita off with Bill Poe, Laredo's enemy. But even in this hour of triumph, Fat Fox was uneasy. Laredo was a hard hater and he had been double-crossed on that Nogales deal with Ramon Nevers. Laredo had lost the Patterson bill of sale and ten thousand dollars. Nevers had lost his life. Now Bill Poe was with Rosita at the banquet.

Fox hoped those two bodyguards were sober. If they fell down on the job there might be trouble. Fox kept sliding his hand under his coat to where his gun was in its shoulder holster. He knew that Bill Poe was armed, and Poe would not hesitate to shoot. Just the same, it was an uneasy feeling, sitting there at the head of his banquet table, waiting for trouble.

Bill Poe kept thinking of Pat. After the show he had seen her in her dusty arena clothes, helping load her horses. He had passed Doc and spoken, but the usually genial Doc had barely nodded. Everybody knew by now that Bill Poe had hired out to Fat Fox. It was like being called a leper. Only Nigger Ben seemed loyal, Nigger Ben, whom Bill Poe had practically sold into slavery to Fat Fox.

The champagne tasted bitter in Bill's mouth. The food was like sawdust. It was hard to talk to Rosita. He knew that she hated him because of Laredo. Her dark eyes smoldered with that hatred of her kind. Grimly he wondered if she might try to stick a knife in his ribs as they sat there, side by side.

Waiters came and went with food and empty dishes. They were Mexicans, dressed in resplendent rodeo clothes. Nobody ever pays much attention to a wait-

er. Fat Fox, more than half drunk, paid no attention at all to them. Only two people at the table recognized a pock-marked waiter. Those two people were Bill Poe and the dancer Rosita.

"Never thought I'd see Mateo waitin' on table," Bill said to her, as he pushed back his chair. Even as Mateo's knife flashed, Bill's fist dropped him to the floor. The knife had ripped Fox's coat, but Bill Poe's swift blow had saved the big man from being stabbed in the back.

MATEO, stunned, lay sprawled on the floor. Bill picked up the keen-bladed knife and handed it to Fox. Fox's face was mottled, blank looking. He stared at the knife that had nearly killed him. He seemed horribly fascinated by the look of the whetted steel. Like most white men, he had a deadly fear of cold steel.

Bill Poe kicked Mateo to his feet. "Go back and tell that pardner of yours that you missed the target, hombre."

Bill Poe grinned faintly at the white-faced Rosita. "Now if you'll hand over that pig-sticker you have, we can go on with the supper," he said in a low tone audible only to her ears. "Slip it under your napkin and shove it to me. Pick up my napkin. Be a good girl or it will mean trouble. You know Fox."

Rosita bit her under lip until blood stained her white teeth. In the confusion of ousting the pock-marked Mateo who walked dizzily, dragged along by one of the bodyguards who had been summoned, she slid a thin-bladed, pearl-handled dagger from somewhere on her person and obeyed Bill Poe's orders.

The color was back now in Fat Fox's face, but his hand shook as he lifted a glass of wine and gulped it down. His bloodshot eyes looked at Bill Poe. "I won't forget this, Poe," he said. "You saved my life. You won't lose by it."

The excitement over, people went on eating and drinking. Bill Poe slid the thin-bladed dagger into his vest pocket. Then he grinned faintly at Rosita. "Nobody will know, Rosita. I'll give you back your toy when the party is over."

Her red lips curled in a catlike snarl. *"Gringo cabron!"*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Renegade Lies

BEFORE Bill Poe and Nigger Ben left for the Fox ranch down in Mexico, Fat Fox had a talk with Bill. "You handle no more wet cattle for me, Poe. Run the outfit on the level. I know the truth about that trouble you had in Mexico. I had a little medicine talk with the governor. They've torn the page out of the book, wiped out the charges against you. You've got a clean slate now."

"When did you do this, Fox?"

"After the banquet last night. The Governor of Chihuahua was at the hotel under another name. I managed to see him. Poe, you don't need to be afraid of the adobe wall down there any more. And you don't have to play crooked when you run my outfit. As a matter of fact, you aren't bound in any way to take the job. You're free, white and of age. You don't like me. Well, you don't need to work for me."

"When I make a bargain," said Bill Poe, "I keep it. When you say I don't like you, you come close to the truth. What I did last night I'd have done for any other man. Understand that."

Fat Fox nodded. "You don't beat around the bush any."

"I'll run the ranch for you and do the best I can. I'm glad I don't have to handle wet cattle. And helping me out

of that Chihuahua jam puts me in your debt. I'll work it out for you."

"You ain't working for a dead horse, Poe. We start even from here. Name your own wages and pay Nigger Ben what he's worth to you. Another thing. About that bill of sale I gave you. I had nothing to do with robbing old Doc Patterson of his outfit. I don't lie, drunk or sober. I managed to get hold of the bill of sale. I used it to get you and Nigger Ben to work for me. I need men I can trust. Poe, there won't ever be any contract between you and me. And you're free to quit any time. Now, mister, will you have a drink with me or not?"

"Fox, you're makin' it damned hard for me to hate you like I always did. I'll drink with you."

So they drank together. Then Bill went down to the fair grounds to see about loading his rope horse. He wanted to see Pat and tell her that he was going straight when he worked for Fox. He wouldn't mention the bill of sale except to tell her that Fox had no part in the getting of it from Doc.

But Doc and Pat had loaded their horses last night and pulled out for home. Nigger Ben had helped them load. Ben met Bill at the barn.

"They done gone, Mistah Bill. Pulled out las' night. Doggone, I come near tellin' de plumb truf about 'at ol' bill uh sale. Miss Pat ain' fool me none. She bin cryin'. Ol' Mistah Doc look mighty solemn. Shucks, Mistah Bill, why you-all don' tell her how you git 'at paper back fum Fat Fox?"

"I might, some day." He told Ben about his talk with Fox. Ben listened in silence. After a while Ben spoke:

"Don' trus' 'at Fat Fox too much. He don' look like no Sandy Claus to Niggah Ben. Watch yo' step. An' we got to watch 'at Laredo snake. He done pull out las' night. Him an' Mateo. Laredo sho' look nasty. We goin' to have trouble wid 'em two. Yes, *suh.*"

NIGGER BEN had guessed right. It was rough country down below the Border. The Fox lease covered thousands of acres. And while Bill Poe had plenty of Mexican vaqueros to cover the range and keep the calves and mavericks branded up, still he knew that cattle were being run off. The Fox F brand was easy enough to work and there were some expert brand changers north of the Border where rustlers found a ready market for wet cattle.

Fox had given Bill Poe a free hand. Bill had fired every man whom he knew to be friendly with Laredo or Mateo. He hired new men—Texas and Arizona cowboys, Mexican vaqueros. And from the men fired by Bill Poe, Laredo had recruited his rustler gang. Whereas before Laredo had stolen for Fat Fox, he now stole from him. A hard-riding, fast-shooting pack of renegades were Laredo and his mongrel crew. They made swift raids, shooting down men, running off cattle. And back in the mountains where they lived, they drank and sang and danced with their Mexican girls, and boasted about how they had stolen cattle from Fox, how they had out-witted Bill Poe.

Fat Fox was in Mexico City for a month or two, so it was said. It was up to Bill Poe and Nigger Ben. Down across the Border, they hated Fat Fox, ranchers, vaqueros, peons alike. They cursed his name and gave their aid to Laredo who had proclaimed himself leader of the wronged ranchers who had been robbed by Fox. And these ranchers and vaqueros forgot that it had been the hard-riding Laredo who had robbed them of their cattle.

The saloon run by Brazos was where Bill Poe got his bits of information. Brazos liked Bill and Nigger Ben.

"Bill," he said, when Bill Poe informed

him that he was running the Fox outfit, "I hate Fox's guts. I might kill him some day. But I won't ever do anything to hurt you or Ben. Laredo is worse than Fox. He's gathered himself some tough gents and he's goin' after you. He made his brag here and he's made it along both sides of the Border. He swears he'll kill Fox and you when he gets around to it. They got a regular town back in the hills—cantinas, saloons, everything that renegade pack wants when they get back from a raid. That dancer Rosita is queen of the town. Laredo is the *muy grande* boss. Mateo is his straw-boss. You got a game to play, Bill."

Bill Poe nodded and hitched up his gun belt. He looked gaunt and worn out. Lines of worry marked his face these days. He knew what they were saying along the Border. They were laughing at him. They were saying that Laredo Jamison was taking Bill Poe and Fat Fox to a trimming. Bill Poe had lost friends by working for Fox. Laredo saw to that when he bragged and boasted and squandered the money he made from the cattle he was stealing from Fox. Bill often wondered if those stories ever reached the ears of Pat Patterson. He had no way of finding out. He seldom saw anyone from the little Border town where Doc had his livery and feed barn. Even if he did meet a man who might have stopped there or at Doc's ranch just out of town, he was too proud to ask. He reckoned Pat was lost to him for keeps, except in the dreams he had out under the stars by a campfire.

Nobody along the Border would have believed that Bill Poe was running an honest outfit. The idea of Fox wanting to own a square spread was a joke. The name of Fat Fox meant crookedness. And now they were telling it that Laredo was out-smarting Bill Poe and making him look like a peon goat herder.

SO LAREDO JAMISON rode his reckless, swaggering, boasting way, leading his renegade pack on raids. And whenever he got the chance he would stop at Doc Patterson's barn or at the ranch. He would stay just long enough to plant some seed for thought. In his own clever way he would mention Bill Poe—how Bill wasn't doing so well handling wet cattle because the neighboring ranchers were onto him and were putting up a fight. Laredo liked to picture himself as a modern Robin Hood of the Border. He was going to run Fat Fox out of Mexico. For old-times'-sake, he hated to think that Bill Poe would be killed down there. He would speak of the days when he and Bill Poe had ridden together.

"I haven't a thing in the world against Bill, Doc. He's just let Fat Fox buy him. I'd like to do something for old Bill. But I can't do a thing. These people of Mexico have had too much of Fox. They're getting back what he stole from them. Fox is in Mexico City right now, scared to come back to the Border because he knows they'll kill him. So far, I've kept 'em from killing Bill Poe. But the way they feel now, I don't know how long I can hold 'em off."

"Don't get hurt trying, Laredo," Pat told him, and her steady, unsmiling gaze made his face redden.

Another time when he stopped at the ranch and had come from the barn with Doc, Pat halted him at the door. "Either give me that bottle or get off the place. And don't ever give Doc another drink."

Laredo had surrendered the bottle which Pat emptied on the ground. He stayed only a few minutes, then rode back to town, cursing himself for a fool. He shouldn't have sprung that bottle on Doc but he wanted to feel Doc out about how Pat felt towards him. And Doc, after

a few nips, would get a little loose-tongued. He hadn't figured on Doc showing his drinks that way. Nor had he expected that sort of talk from Pat. Hell, he'd let old Doc beat him in half a dozen horse trades, just to get in right once more with Pat.

But Laredo was not the kind to give up easily. He made other visits to the Patterson ranch. He was very careful to show up sober. He and Doc would sit on the corral or in the shade of the barn and make a horse trade of some kind. Each time Doc would be allowed, after hours of dickering, to get the best of the deal. And by that time it would be around noon or supper time and Pat would naturally have to ask him to eat. And before he left Laredo would always manage to drop some lying bit of news about Bill Poe.

"The thing I can't savvy about Bill is him makin' a plumb fool of himself over that Mexican girl, Rosita. She's down there and I hear he's goin' to marry her. Remember, she used to dance at Nogales at Fox's big cantina. Seems like Bill got stuck on her a long time ago. He took her to that big banquet Fox gave at Prescott. Some say it was her that talked Bill into workin' for Fox. But then you can't ever tell. You can hear a lot of things if you want to listen long enough."

"Yes." Pat had left the room, her face a little white. This was not the first time she had heard about Bill Poe and Rosita. Laredo had seen to that.

So again Laredo rode away from the Patterson ranch. This time he whistled softly as he rode towards town.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Boast of the Buzzards

NO MAN ever worked harder than Bill Poe. Bill Poe and Nigger Ben were in the saddle night and day. Bill Poe was working with a desperate grimness to plug the gaps along the Border that Laredo and his men were using to run the Fox cattle across. Bill and Nigger Ben knew every gap. It had taken them weeks of gruelling, dangerous work.

One evening at dusk Bill and Nigger Ben lay hidden at one of the gaps. It was rough country and the camps of the U. S. Border Patrol man and the Mexican Inspector were a stone's throw apart. The two men saddled up and rode away together, into the rough hills. The stars came out and shortly after moonrise, a bunch of cattle were crowded through the pass. A man stopped at each of the two camps, dismounted and went into the tents. Then he rode on with the cattle that were headed for some ready market.

Bill Poe and Ben watched and waited. In less than an hour they were rewarded by the appearance of the two Border officials. The Mexican Inspector was half drunk. They were drinking tequila from the same bottle. Each unsaddled and staked his horse, then went into his tent. They met again in the tent of the U. S. Border patrol man. Their shadows were silhouetted inside the lighted tent. Their voices were easy to hear. They were sitting at a table drinking when Bill Poe jerked open the door of the house tent. His gun covered them.

"So it's easy money that you got tonight, is it, my *amigos?* Well, hand it over and get ready to take a ride. Your bosses are waiting to talk to you. My Mexican *amigo,* it might mean the adobe wall for you. As for you, gringo, you'll do a stretch in federal prison."

About noon the next day three men rode down the dusty street of a town on the Border. Two of these men rode stirrup to stirrup. Their hands were free but their feet were tied under the bellies

of their horses. There was a rope around the neck of each man, about an eight-foot length that linked them together by the neck. One of these wore the uniform of a Mexican Inspector. The other wore the uniform of a U. S. Border Patrol officer. Behind them rode Bill Poe. He halted them at an adobe building. A big man with grizzled white hair showed in the doorway. He wore civilian clothes but there was a gold badge pinned to his flannel shirt. With him was a uniformed Mexican.

"Here they are," said Bill Poe, "and here's the money paid them last night by Laredo Jamison's man. You marked it yourself and I saw to it that Laredo's man got it from Brazos. Laredo uses Brazos' saloon as a bank. Here are their confessions. They both showed yellow when the showdown came. Protect Brazos on this or Laredo's gang will wipe him out."

"He'll be protected, don't worry," said the big American. "That was good work, Poe."

"One gap plugged," Poe said. "Sweat these two out and they'll talk more. I'll have two of my men handle that gap. They won't need any uniforms. Just the badges I took off these two snakes. I'm doin' what I said I'd do—covering every loophole along the Border with men that Laredo can't buy. They're men that will fight. I'll prove to you that I didn't lie when I said the Fox outfit was bein' run on the square. I'll wipe out that nest of snakes in the hills at that hideout they call Rustlers' Roost. I feel sorry for some of the ranchers that threw in with Laredo. I want to see them get off without bein' hurt. But that marijuana-smokin', mescal-drinkin' gang that claim to be so tough, they're goin' to pay plenty."

"We'll do our share on both sides of the Border, Poe. But you've bitten off a big chunk of red meat."

"I'll do my best to chew and swallow it," replied Bill Poe.

Late that night he met Nigger Ben and they rode into the little town where Brazos ran his saloon. The lanky Texan was nowhere in sight. The lighted saloon was empty. Broken glass, overturned tables and smashed chairs littered the floor. The windows were shattered. The back bar was pocked with bullet marks. The safe had been blown open.

Nigger Ben and Bill Poe jerked their guns and stepped back outside into the darkness. Then, from the black shadows sounded the voice of Brazos, muffled, husky.

"That you, Bill?"

"Where are you, Brazos?"

"Behind this 'dobe wall. I'm ventilated up some but I got my share of 'em. Laredo's gang shot up the town tonight."

RUSTLERS' ROOST was hidden in the roughest part of the mountains. It was a small town where only renegades who rode with Laredo were welcome. A saloon, a store, a cantina, scattered houses made of adobe, and caves where some of the outlaws lived like wolves with their serapes for beds, made up the town. Trails led up the canyon sides to these caves. The floor of the canyon was fertile, ripe with fruit trees and vegetable gardens, and abundant feed for the horses and mules and burros.

The canyon was like a green pocket hidden by the gray rocks that towered into the cloudless sky. A small river tumbled down in a fify-foot fall from the rocks at the canyon head, ran the length of the box canyon, then fell into a subterranean river through a black cavern. The roar of the falling water always filled the canyon which was accessible only by one trail that twisted down out of the

mountains above. This trail was always guarded.

Tonight Laredo and his men were celebrating. Whiskey and wine stolen from Brazos' saloon flowed like water. Laredo swaggered his way around. At the cantina, the percentage girls were kept busy dancing. Mostly they were Mexican girls. Rosita was their queen, Rosita in her red slippers, her sheath-like black silk dress, her flowered Spanish mantilla, and the high comb in her black hair. She had braved the wrath of Fat Fox to run away with her lover. She had outlawed herself when she joined Laredo. Now she was queen of Rustlers' Roost. She sang and danced and constantly quarreled with Laredo whenever he looked twice at another girl. Rosita was quick with a knife and more than one foolish senorita had felt the sting of her thin-bladed dagger. Laredo also had felt its bite and in return had quirted her bare back until the welts stood out like red snakes.

"The next time you try to stick me with that thing," he told her as she lay on the floor of the cantina, writhing in pain, "I'll turn you over to Fox."

But tonight Laredo was dancing with her. He was just back from a trip across the Border where he had peddled a herd of wet cattle that he and his men had stolen from Fat Fox. He had made another horse trade with Doc Patterson and had spent the previous evening in the company of Pat Patterson who had been unusually cordial. And on the way back to Rustlers' Roost, they had raided Brazos' saloon and shot up the town.

Even as Laredo danced with Rosita he kept trying to imagine it was Pat Patterson he was holding in his arms. And he was telling himself that as soon as he had taken care of Fat Fox and Bill Poe and Nigger Ben, he would marry Pat Patterson and go to South America to live. He had mentioned something of the sort last night to Pat and she had not withdrawn her hand from his. He'd been a little drunk and had done some boasting. He had told her that Bill Poe and Fat Fox were as good as in their graves. He had told her that he was smashing Fox and that Bill Poe would be smashed also. He bragged some about stealing cattle from Fox and how he was making Bill Poe look like a clown on horseback. And Pat had smiled and nodded and listened.

So now he danced at Rustlers' Roost with Rosita. He had money hidden away, money that he had made stealing from Fat Fox. And now there was enough in his cache to start up business in South America.

Laredo and his renegades were having a real celebration. The men on guard at the top of the trail were having a little celebration of their own, with vino and mescal and tequila, barbecued beef and marijuana cigarettes. Four of them were on guard up there, two Mexican, two American renegades. One of the Mexicans was playing a guitar and singing that marching song of countless ribald verses about *Cucaracha,* the Cockroach, so well known to the men who followed the dusty trails ridden by Pancho Villa. He was in the middle of his song when an interruption came.

"We don't like your music, hombre. All of you sons of snakes reach for the moon and reach high. Get their guns, Ben. Kill any of 'em that wiggle a finger or look cross-eyed. Brazos, know any of these gents?"

"All of 'em, Bill."

"Any of 'em you want to kill?"

"Shootin' makes noise, Bill," drawled Brazos, "and I never was much of a hand with a knife."

"Then we'll hogtie 'em and save 'em for the law. I'll help Ben tie 'em up while you stand guard. We're payin' a visit to Rustlers' Roost."

CHAPTER NINE

The Way to Die

IT WAS not fear that had kept Fat Fox away from the Border. He stayed down in Mexico City for some time, then slipped northward and made his headquarters at one of his abandoned mines. It made a quiet hideaway. Every night news was relayed to him by some trusted messenger. Fat Fox was giving Bill Poe a chance to prove his worth. Rumor had it that Laredo was stealing Fox blind and was making a monkey out of Bill Poe. Then had come the secret report that Bill Poe and Nigger Ben had stopped one gap. But on top of that came the news that Brazos' saloon had been robbed and the town shot up. Laredo had made a swift, deadly attack, sacking the town, looting it. It looked as if Poe had been licked again.

"We'll head for the ranch," Fox told his two bodyguards. "Get the horses ready. We'll pay Bill Poe a visit. If he's in cahoots with Laredo, it will be too damn bad for both of 'em."

At Dusk Fat Fox and his two bodyguards rode up to his home ranch. At the barn he saw a girl in cowboy clothes arguing heatedly with the barn man. Fat Fox grinned faintly as he tipped his hat.

"Trouble, lady?"

Pat Patterson nodded. "I want to see Bill Poe. It's urgent. A matter of life and death. I rode here to see him and I'm going to see him or know why."

"I'd like to see Poe, myself, lady."

"This barn man says he isn't at the ranch. Is he lying?"

"Are you lying?" Fox asked the man.

"Bill Poe ain't here. Neither is Nigger Ben. I don't know where they went."

Fat Fox turned to Pat. "Looks like we're out of luck, Miss Patterson. We'll make one more try, though, if you feel like takin' a ride. We'll grab a bite to eat and then we'll hit the trail."

"I'm not hungry," Pat answered.

"Suit yourself, Miss. But there won't be any grub in sight till tomorrow and we got a long ride to make. I'm playing a hunch. I know it ain't my business, but what fetches you to my ranch to see Bill Poe? Last I heard you wouldn't even speak to him."

"That's my business." Pat Patterson's cheeks reddened.

"What if I told you that Bill Poe hated me and that the reason he's working for me now is because he's paying off Doc Patterson's gambling bill?"

"What do you mean?" Pat's face was drained of color now and her voice was husky.

"I mean that I'm still betting on Bill Poe against Laredo. Bill Poe hired out to me when he hated me. He did it to get that bill of sale Doc Patterson signed one night when he was drunk. Poe is working out a debt."

"But Nigger Ben said he. . . ."

"That he won back the bill of sale in a crap game. He lied because Bill Poe told him to. I gave that bill of sale to Poe when he promised to work for me."

"I understand."

"And now, why do you ride this far to see Poe?"

"I've been leading on Laredo Jamison. He's done a lot of bragging. He's been trading horses with Doc and losing every time and pulling the wool over Doc's eyes. Laredo has been stealing your cattle. He's lied about Bill Poe and that Rosita woman. I know because I've talked to Nigger Ben once or twice, and I've talked to the chief of the Border patrol. Laredo wants to kill you and Bill Poe. I came to warn Bill. I didn't know that I owed him for that bill of sale. Nigger Ben never told me the truth about it,

you see. Fox, I owe you that money. Let Bill Poe quit. I'll pay the debt."

"Even if I. . . ."

"I said I'd pay off the debt, Fox. I know the kind of a man you are. I'll pay."

"Better have some supper, Miss Patterson. We'll call the debt paid."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I'm betting on Bill Poe. Did he tell you that he's running an honest outfit? Did you know that he saved my life and that Fat Fox pays his debts? Do you know that I didn't have anything to do with your father making out that bill of sale? Listen, you rode this far to find Bill Poe. I'll help you find him. Then you better marry him before you both get too old to laugh at life together. Now will you have a bite of supper?"

"Yes. Thanks." The anger, the antagonism was gone from Pat's voice.

At the big ranch house Fox made her feel at home. It was a rambling old adobe that had been rebuilt from the ruins of the original walls. Indian rugs covered the floors. Old portraits hung on the walls. It was quiet, cool, inside.

"I have changed my mind about letting you take that ride with us," said Fat Fox when they had finished a hasty supper. "You stay here. You'll be protected. Old Margarita will stay with you in the same room if you like. There will be men on guard all night. Stay here till we get back."

"Where are you going?"

Fat Fox buckled on his cartridge belt. He knocked the ash from a Mexican cigar and took a drink of tequila with lemon and salt.

"I'm riding to Laredo's headquarters. They call it Rustlers' Roost."

BILL POE and Nigger Ben rode down the twisting trail. There was a full moon that splashed the canyon walls with white light, making deeper the black shadows in the lower part of the canyon. Brazos, because he was wounded, stayed on guard at the top of the trail.

Bill Poe led the way down the trail, his six-shooter in his hand. Nigger Ben rubbed his rabbit's foot and grinned. There was no guard below. Bill and Ben left their horses where they could get them in a hurry, then slipped along through the shadows towards the cantina.

Now and then a drunken man lurched across the light that shone from the windows of the cantina and saloon. From the cantina came the music of a Mexican orchestra. Bill Poe and Nigger Ben, keeping to the shadows, moved carefully. They'd need more than the average man's share of luck to take on all Laredo's men. Their plan was to capture Laredo Jamison and Mateo and turn them over to the law. After that the smashing of the renegade gang would be easy.

From the cantina now came the voice of Rosita singing one of her songs. Through the window Bill Poe could see her in the center of the dance floor. He saw Laredo and Mateo talking at the bar, apart from the crowd.

They had been waiting, crouched in the shadows, for more than an hour. To both of them action was welcome. They walked boldly into the dimly-lit cantina. Nobody took notice of them. Laredo was unaware of their presence until Bill Poe's voice sounded in his ear.

"Heard you was puttin' on a celebration, Laredo, so I dropped over. I'm reppin' for the Fox outfit this evenin'. Me and Nigger Ben."

Bill Poe's voice was a slow drawl. He grinned faintly as Laredo started for his revolver, then changed his mind.

"Long time no see you, Poe. Drink?" Laredo's smile was twisted, lipless.

"Don't mind if I do, Laredo. And tell

your bartender to set out gin for Ben. And another thing, Laredo. If any man in this place makes any kind of a gun play, you'll get a belly full of lead. They'll kill me, mebby, but I'll take you along. So no signals."

"No signals, Poe. I never thought to send you an invitation to our *baile* tonight. Now that you're here, make yourself at home. I'll do what I can to make the Fox rep feel welcome at Rustlers' Roost. Here comes Rosita. Want a dance with her?"

Rosita, with her guitar, came up, her dark eyes narrowed, her lips smiling.

"The Senor Poe, major-domo for Fox, eh?" Rosita's voice was like thin glass breaking.

"Poe came over for the fiesta," said Laredo. "He and Nigger Ben just dropped in to represent the Fox outfit. Want to dance with him, *chiquita?*"

"Why not?" There was a challenge in her black eyes.

From outside came the sound of shooting. Laredo scowled. He turned to Mateo.

"Tell those *borrachons* outside to quit that damn' noise. It costs money to furnish them with cartridges. All those *paisanos* think about when they get drunk is shooting."

"That," said the pock-marked Mateo, "ees not celebration shooting, senor. That ees something different." His hand slid to his gun. But he did not pull it.

Nigger Ben's two huge black paws held guns. Bill Poe's gun covered Laredo.

"I come to take you to the Border," Bill Poe told Laredo. "I don't know what that shootin' out yonder is about. Don't care. You two are comin' with me."

Laredo crouched like a cougar about to spring. His hand hovered above his white-handled gun. His lips curled.

"You'll never take me anywhere, Poe." Laredo's voice was flat, deadly. His eyes were slitted, hard. "Give me an even break for my gun if you're half the man you claim to be."

"You're askin' for it, Laredo," replied Bill Poe, slowly shoving his gun back in its holster. "I don't want to kill you. But you're askin' for it. I'll give you your even chance."

They stood not ten feet apart now. Both men had stepped back a few paces from the bar. Nigger Ben's guns covered Mateo and the others. There was a wide grin on the black giant's face—a grin that sent shivers down more than one spine. This was Nigger Ben, known as one of the deadliest killers along the Border.

Then the door of the cantina burst open. Bill Poe saw Laredo's gaze shift toward the doorway and his hand jerk at his gun. At that instant Bill Poe felt a burning pain in his gun arm. His hand slid away from his revolver as if paralized. More burning pains shot through his back. He whirled in time to snatch the blood-stained dagger from Rosita's hand. She had stabbed him half a dozen times. Now, screaming with rage, she clawed at him. Bill flung her aside and got to his gun with his left hand.

Things were happening now in split seconds. Bill Poe saw it all through a red haze that whirled like a pinwheel. Laredo, hanging to the bar with one hand was shooting with the other. Fat Fox, down on the floor, was shooting back at Laredo. Brazos with a smoking gun in his hand, weaving like a drunken man—Mateo in a crumpled heap—Nigger Ben wading into the crowd, clubbing down men with two empty six-shooters. Bill Poe was into the fight with Nigger Ben now, using his gun as a club. It might have been seconds or minutes before he went down, still fighting. . . .

HE woke up with the splash of water in his face. Nigger Ben, his black face

smeared with blood, grinned widely. "Sho' some battle while she last, Mistah Bill." He took a drink from his bottle of gin. "Yes, *suh!*"

Rustlers' Roost was no more. Tomorrow they would bury Laredo Jamison here. With him would be buried Rosita who had killed herself with her own knife. The pock-marked Mateo would find his grave here in the canyon.

Fat Fox lived until dawn. He called for pen and ink and paper. "I'm cashing in my chips, Poe," he said. "Laredo got me just like I got him. I want you to take good care of that little girl that is waitin' for you at the ranch. That's why I'm leavin' you everything I own—to you and her. You and Brazos and Nigger Ben look after the outfit."

As the sun came into the canyon, Fox gripped Bill Poe's hand. "Tell her, Poe, that I wasn't as bad as they painted me. I know I was, but you'd lie that much for me, I reckon."

Bill Poe nodded. "I reckon, Fox, that I can tell her that and not be lyin'."

"Good luck, Poe."

"Good luck."

And so Fat Fox cashed in his chips at Rustlers' Roost carrying with him the many secrets of his life. No man had ever really known Fox. Behind him he left something that would make for happiness to Bill Poe and Pat Patterson and many others. No matter what he had been, how he had lived, Fat Fox knew how to die.

DOC PATTERSON chewed some peppermint candy and cloves. In spite of the fact that he had shaved and bathed and put on his black broadcloth suit, he still gave off a fain odor of the stable, horse liniment and whiskey. Doc had made a good horse trade that morning. And not only that, he had taken the bandages off the game leg of the Big Enough horse and had proved to Nigger Ben that the horse was as sound as ever.

"Don't know of a better wedding present in the world," Pat had told Doc when she tried out the pony.

Now Doc was getting ready for the wedding. He was all slicked up. There'd a big dance to-night after Pat and Bill Poe got hitched up in double harness. Down stairs the folks were gathering for the wedding. Pat had decorated the old ranch house where she had been born. She was down the hall now in her room, her bridesmaids with her. From down stairs came the blurred sounds of the cow country folks gathered there.

There came a knock on Doc's door. He opened to let in Bill Poe and Nigger Ben. Ben had charge of the music and refreshments that come in bottled form.

"Thought you might be shaky, Doc," said Bill. "Ben has a little somethin'."

In Doc's bedroom they each took a drink. Nigger Ben, his black face shining as if polished, white teeth gleaming, put away the bottle. From his vest pocket Doc took some cloves and peppermint candy and solemnly passed them around. He gripped Bill Poe's hand, his blue eyes a little misty.

"Beat yuh on this trade, Bill. Swappin' you a daughter but I'm gettin' both of you back. Gettin' me back a daughter and a son that ain't got a blemish on 'im. Bill Poe, I'm damned proud to own you."

THE END

NEXT MONTH—

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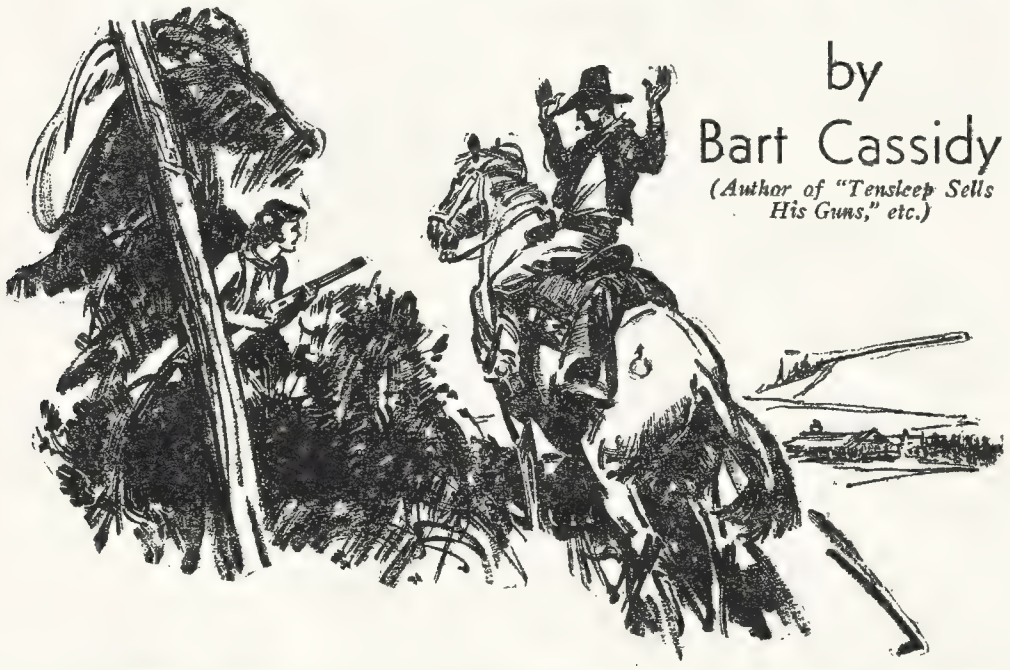
TENSLEEP—COLT LAWYER



by
Bart Cassidy
(Author of "Tensleep Sells His Guns," etc.)

Tensleep Maxon gives up posse-dodging long enough to help hitch together a lonely saddle-whacker and a girl in distress, though by doing so he ties his own hangman's knot.

A NUMBER uh things draws me away from the Thirsty River country. But mostly it's long tales of a Englisher that settled in the Piedra Hills—back about 'Ninety—to raise Morgan hawses. Second son of a second son, so I'm told—a bayin' hound fer red-eye an' drawin' enough remittance from England to keep him good an' drunk. He musta finally got crawly in the hair, 'cause they find his skeleton layin' in the house, a hole in his skull an' a rusty pistol near his boney hand.

But his Morgans done good an', accordin' to the yarn, still spook through the Piedra Hills, darin' some reckless hairpin to tame 'em. Which is a challenge to High Ball's runnin' power an' likewise to my rope swingin' an' bronc stompin'. So, bein' restless an' good-fer-nothin', I draw my time from Old Arturo Velasco an' head fer the Piedras.

Mid afternoon I'm climbin' out of a canyon to'rds a high hot rim speckled with scrub pines an' low brush. From all I've bin told, I must be gettin' purty close to the layout of the Morgan-raisin' Englisher. My eyes is lifted to'rds the top an' that's howcome me to see twelve riders spur their ponies to the rim an' set there lookin' down on the other side. Somehow remindin' me of a lotta things I'd like to forget. So I rein in High Ball, to watch 'em without bein' seen. But, after about a minute, they ride over the other side an' disappear.

Givin' 'em a reasonable time to git outa my way, I spur on up to the top, set there a moment lookin' down just as them twelve riders done, lookin' down on as neat an' cunnin' a spread as a feller'd care to see. There is a log house flanked with barn, corrals an' a wide fenced pasture in a water meadow. From descrip-

tions, I know it's the layout started by the English remittance-man that eased himself outa this life astraddle of a .45 slug. Right now there's a half circle uh riders around the door an' from the way they're wavin' their guns, I know there's red hot hell in the air.

I'm watchin' 'em an' wonderin' what's the rip, when High Ball snorts an' shies. I stick a spur into his gizzard an' square him around. To my left the brush stirs. The blue barrel of a Winchester comes stickin' through. Behind it is a face, a gal's face.

"Start clawin' blue sky; you lousy crawlin' snake!" she barks, icy. "The only way you can save yore worthless hide now is to call off yore pardners. An' make it persuasive or else. . . . "

Whee-ew! Am I scairt. Ninety-nine percent scait anyway, 'cause the muzzle of that Winchester's plenty steddy. An' what I see in them smoky eyes tells me it's no joke. I'm as near to death right now as ever I was in my sin-studded life.

"Well, wouldn't that grab yore tail an' wring it?" I gasp. "Held up by a slip of a gal—an' a right purty gal at that. Keerful, ma'am, how yuh lean on that trigger. If it's on hair, yuh might accidental git yoreself a pore innocent cowboy that wants tuh live more'n ever after admirin' the scenery uh these Piedra Hills."

"Innocent!" she sneers. "I reckon you'll claim you ain't one of those Association skunks, that yo're just a pore homeless cownurse pickin' buttercups amongst the chaparral?"

"Yes ma'am," I agree, docile. "Pickin' posies an' no part of an Association skunk. But le's talk about you, ma'am. I've anted ag' in' trouble, till the critter's sign is as plain tuh read as the shadders in yore eyes. Yeah, I bin loopin' at trouble so long, I know all its runnin' tricks. An', even if I do say so, you'll look a long time before findin' a better hand tuh buck trouble than Showdown Jones, same bein' me."

For a second she don't say nothin'. Then the muzzle uh that Winchester starts swingin' tiny circles.

"Yuh mean," she asks, a eager tremble in her voice, "that you'll . . . you'll help me?" Then the old harshness comes back. "Even if you was tellin' the truth about not bein' one of 'em, you couldn't do nothin'. The odds is too great."

"Odds in life, ma'am," I tell her, "is like odds in poker. The feller with the tall stack kin play 'em close to his vest an' pray fer luck. But the jigger that's down to his last whites must shove 'em in reckless or the ante'll eat him up. Are you down near yore last chips, ma'am?"

"Look!" she says, lettin' the gun droop an' pointin' at the house.

The riders are troopin' out of the place, draggin' two fellers an' headin' to'rds a handy box elder tree. Two of 'em are shakin' out loops as they walk.

"A hang party!" I blurt. "In whose honor, ma'am?"

"Dad!" she says, sorta deadly. "An' my brother Buck."

"Fer what?"

"For nothin'! They're in the way of Seminole Durkin an' his Rafter G Bar Riders. Since dad taken this up as a homestead Seminole's been houndin' him. Guess we're interferin' with their night runnin' of horses through here an' over the Cow Creek Pass to rail. They been robbin' their own bosses an' layin' it to rustlers I betcha. . . ."

"Seminole bein' Rafter G Bar foreman?" I ask, never liftin' my eyes from that death march below.

"Yes," she answers, an' there's tears in her voice.

"An' who are you folks?" I inquire.

"I'm Della Lambert. My dad is Mark Lambert. Buck Lambert is my brother."

"Lissen, Della," I say, serious. "I'm antein' a chip in this game an' I mebbyso will lose my taw. You gotta help me 'cause alone they'll put me in the squeeze. But with fear of guns from the hill. . . . Now lissen: when I'm talkin' to 'em, if I raise my hand, send a shot hummin' over their heads."

"I'll send it into their hearts!" she snaps.

"Don't do it, ma'am," I beg her. "Leave gun killin's to men who lean thataway. Don't let the takin' uh human life put a curse on yore soul. Do like I tell yuh; when I lift my arms, throw a shot over their heads. If that don't do no good—then it's time to think about plantin' somebody."

SHE nods, her eyes lightenin' from the hopelessness that's gloomin' 'em, an' she flashes a puny smile uh confidence. But it's friendly, warms me inside an' makes my chest grow a foot. Grinnin' back at her, I kick Highball in the flank an' send him buckjumpin' down the hill.

The hang party has reached the box elder tree an' they've tightened a couple loops around the necks of the two Lamberts as I hit the flat an' lope to'rds 'em hollerin' like an Assinaboine full uh Injun likker. They whirl like somebody has fanned 'em with buckshot, their hands fallin' to their guns. An' I mean they're a hard-lookin' crew as I rear High Ball back an' swing down to face 'em.

"Gents!" I holler, flashin' my best bartender smile. "Am I to late fer the trial?"

The two with their necks in a noose sorta brighten. Buck Lambert, the kid, is the spitten image of the gal back yonder on the hill. An inch over six foot mebby an' lean in the middle. He looks plumb weak, both as to muscles an' will. An' in his pale blue eyes is the fear uh death mirrored. He's lookin' at me like I was the answer to a doomed cowboy's dream.

His dad however is somethin' else. He's not as tall as his boy but just as lean. With the stringy elanness of a bobcat—an' with the same dangerous tension uh muscles that makes the catamount a ugly customer in any ruckus. His eyes is hopeless too, but not with fear. It's sullenness I read there, sort of a curse against a fate that has denied him the hopes an' prayers of a lifetime. He's whipped down right now but is a feller to take along where stubbornness is a virtue—if it ever is. . . .

Outa the pack surroundin' them two steps a feller neither short nor tall. Hatless, his coal black hair is bear-oiled back as slick as a tinhorn's fingertips. His features is regular, his eyes snappin' black pin-points an' he might be good-lookin' except for his muddy complexion. He's smilin', if that's the name fer the mere barin' uh snaggy, discolored teeth.

"Much as I hates tuh tell yuh, stranger," he smirks, "yo're too late fer the trial. We done wound her up, the prisoners was found guilty an' . . . . "

"Guilty uh what?" I bust in.

"Of stealin' hawsses!" he barks. "A hangin' offense in any lingo. The prisoners has had their say, bin found guilty an' Judge Lynch has sentenced 'em to hang."

"Bein' lawyer fer the defense," I say, glarin' back at him, "I'm servin' notice of appeal."

"Lawyer!" He laughs insolent. "You? Why you look tuh me like some down-on-his-luck grubliner. An' anytime you think you kin run a blazer on Seminole Durkin, why . . . "

"I'm Showdown Jones!" I tell him, matchin' his writhin' black eyes, "Attorney at law. An' I'm servin' notice here an' now that this case is appealed to a higher court . . . . "

"There ain't no appeal from Judge Lynch!" he snarls.

"That," I say, soft, "I'm prepared to auger out with yuh."

"Good!" he sneers. "Gents, this range lawyer questions our judgment. By yore leave, I'll reopen the case fer another look. What," he asks, his shoulders hunchin' as he whirls to me, "have yuh got tuh match this augerment." His right hand streaks to his leather. His eyes were a dead give away. I'm waitin' fer a like move. "This!" I answer, an' I've got Ol' Pot-likker outa the holster an' the hamer eared back before his barrel clears the holster lip. "I'm wastin' no words on yuh, brother. Keerful! Let it settle. That's the ticket. Gettin' down to the plumb marrow of the soup bone, I'm handin' you my strongest augerments. Six of 'em. Each one pointed with unanswerable logic an' . . . . "

"Yo're hornin' into a private matter what don't concern yuh none whatever," he glowers, his face a muddy white, "an' that's a killin' matter on this range. You wrangle a thick fog uh words an' you throw a purty draw. But all it'll buy yuh here is boothill."

"You'll never live tuh see me planted," I grin. "Yore lynch pards may put me away, but you'll be there ahead uh me. An' in the meantime, my pards is busy. One ridin' to Piedra fer the sheriff, the other layin' on the hill tuh pour .30 calibre lead into the first gent that uncorks the smoke. Think it over!"

"Bluff!" sneers Seminole Durkin. But his hands edge further from his guns.

"Best not git mixed in this, Showdown," gruffs old Mark Lambert. "Not that I don't need help, God knows, but no one man kin stand ag'in these boys an' they've made up their minds I'm in their way."

"I've took yore case, Lambert," I says, cold. "You'll do yore talkin' to me, private. An' I'll tell you what tuh say. How many of you Vigilantes—" I sneer the word an' kin see more'n one of 'em writhe, "—are in favor uh hangin' this old man an' his boy an' leavin' a young gal orphaned an' helpless? Speak up! Lift up yore hands if yore pround of the job I interrupted. I'm mighty near certain that Seminole Durkin's bin bullyraggin' yuh, browbeatin' yuh into doin' his skullduggary fer him. Well, here's yore chance tuh git on record an' in the clear, fer somebody's goin' tuh sweat fer this."

A MIDDLE aged feller with horsetail mustache an' a body bent by years uh saddle-whackin' an' exposure, stands forth, his eyes sorta beggin' an' his face red with embarrassment.

"Jones," he says, kinda bitter, "I'm Tug Saunders of the T Bar S. I don't know you or where yuh git yore information. But somehow you've hit the nail plumb on the head. Ever' man here's a member of the Piedra Cattleman's an' Hawss Breeder's Association. Fer months, Seminole's bin complainin' about the Lamberts stealin' his hawsses. He 'lowed he'd found how Mark Lambert rounds up loose stock, drives 'em through his Lazy L, over Cow Crick Pass an' delivers 'em to a feller named Bent Butterfield, who ships 'em outa Goodan. Last night, Seminole gathers us, sayin' he's got wind of a Lambert drive. At dawn we surprise three fellers takin' hawsses through Cow Crick Pass. There's some gunplay. We fog 'em up but they git away. Most of the hawsses was Lazy L's, but six eight was outa Seminole's Rafter G Bar outfit an' at least one from every outfit in the valley. It looked open an' shut, so we rid down to Lambert's. Mark an' Buck denied it, but couldn't offer no proof uh their innocence, so we voted tuh string 'em."

"You believe the Lamberts done it?" I snap at him.

"Well," he twists uncomfortable, "I don't know. I haven't nothin' personal ag'in' 'em myself. Outside of 'em bein' homesteaders. But their hawsses was hot an' plumb lathered. They'd bin ridin' somewheres an' ridin' hard. An' they wouldn't say where. It looked like they was two of the three we smoked up in Cow Crick. What d'you think?"

"What's thinkin' gotta do about it?" I rap. "I may think a cayuse kin jump over the moon. But if he can't jump over a down saplin' in the trail, he goes belly up an' mebbyso breaks my neck. That's what comes uh thinkin'. To hell with hangin' a man on loose thought. Git on yore hawsses an' go about yore business. If yuh got a case ag'in' my client, swear out a warrant fer his arrest an' git the case set in court . . . . reg'lar."

"Well, pitch me bowlegged!" yelps Seminole, swellin'. "You lettin' this plumb stranger chew-chaw yuh outa what yuh know tuh be yore duty? Yuh wanta know who he is? I'll tell yuh. He's the third rider we spooked with them stole fuzztails this mornin'. I had a good look at him an' I'll swear in court he's the same. C'mon, boys—we'll wind up his ball uh yarn later, but right now le's git on with these two needed hangin's."

Another cowman smiles tauntin'. "Poleaxe yore own beef, Seminole. This ain't my bucherin' day. Personal, I don't like a fencer on this open range no better than the rest. But neither do I like the idee uh hangin' a innocent man. I say give these nesters their walkin' papers. Put 'em on the trail, headed out. An' warn 'em pointed that the next time they show hereabouts will mean fresh funerals fer Piedra range."

Seminole's eyes glitter. "Keno!" he yelps. "Tuh show I'm a fair man, I'll give way tuh that augerment. How's fer the rest?"

They all holler fer it an' the ropes is shucked off the necks of the Lamberts. The Committee climbs their broncs an' Seminole rears his big black hawss before the two still stunned Lamberts.

"Now lissen tuh me, you two!" he barks, levelin' his finger in their blank faces. "We're lettin' yuh off easy. An' you kin thank this Showdown Jones fer yore necks. But if you ain't outa here an' offa Piedra range in twenty-four hours with all yore baggage, not even Showdown Jones an' his phony law-chatter kin save yuh. Don't forgit that."

"They won't forgit it, Seminole," I tell him. "But don't you forgit this: that warnin' don't break no bones. But enforcin' it ain't as simple as that. If the Lamberts happen to decide tuh stay, don't forgit that yo're dealin' with showdown . . . . Showdown Jones. That's all."

He snarls at me, waves at the rest an' leads the way out at a high lope. I'm watchin' 'em go, wonderin' what's next when I hear a voice off to one side.

"Tensleep!" it says. "Tensleep Maxon!"

I whirl an' find that one of the Committee ain't gone with the rest—a grinnin' youngster several inches over six foot, straight as a Injun lance, rawboned thin faced an' capable lookin' with his flarin' batwing chaps an' his low-slung gun. But he ain't nobody I know.

"Excuse me," I say, cold. "But I'm Showdown . . . . "

"I'll say," he grins. "The showdown kid. You shore tell it scary, Tensleep. But there's no need to hooraw me."

"Spill it!" I cut in. "What's yore brand?"

"I'm Stilts Rodeen," he confesses. "I knowed you in Hole-in-the-Wall. But you didn't know me. I was with Butch Cassidy. . . ."

"With Butch?" I bust in. "He ain't around here by no chance?"

Stilts shakes his head, sad. "No, worse luck. I ain't seen him in three year. I hear he's down in the Argentine. An' that's where I'd be, right with him, except he give me the bum's rush just before the Wagner job an made me promise I'd settle down to plain cowpunchin', play the game honest."

"That's like Butch," I chuckle, "an' you'll find how right he was when you've got more years under yore belt. Where yuh located?"

"I'm with Seminole, over at the Rafter G Bar."

"Seminole, eh?" I rasp, an' a blind man kin see my disgust. "He's bad company, Stilts."

"Yo're tellin' me?" he laughs.

"I'm tellin' you," I insist.

"Come tell me more," he suggests, winkin'. "Little round hill where the coyotes yap. Due east of the Rafter . . . one mile. I'll be seein' yuh."

HE ROARS after the Committee an' I turn to face old Mark Lamber. He anglin' to'rds me, his mouth still set in the same grim lines but his eyes sparklin' with gratitude an' his seamed hand outstretched.

"Jones," he says, fervent, "how kin a man thank another fer puttin' the breath uh life in him?"

"He can't," I tell him. "So don't."

"It ain't fer me," he explains. "But Buck here ain't commenced tuh live yet. He ain't overly strong an' lacks fightin' spunk. Then there's his sister—Della. I can't leave these greedy ranges without I've got things fixed fer them, Jones. I jest can't. We come here year an' a half ago, found this old run-down place an' I taken it up as a claim. They let me alone while I fixed it up, which makes me figger that somebody, likely that black Seminole Injun, wants the place an' was willin' I should make it liveable. Then, when we'd got it fixed up nice an' me 'n Buck was ropin' an' tamin' the wild hawsses that range hereabouts, hard luck come clawin' at us—"

His sad eyes flick to a little flower bed beside the house. It's raised up some above the average level an' there's a flat granite slab standin' at the head of it. "My wife died," he says, morose, "an' me an' the children was left alone. Seminole an' others began to devil us. Once a shot crashed in the winder at night. Another time they pulled a section uh my fence out, lettin' a bunch uh ungentled ponies go back to the hills. Another time they poisoned my lower spring, killin' our milk cow and three fine young colts. Then . . . this!" He swings his hand to'rds the hangtree.

"Don't worry, Mister Lambert," I tell him. "I'm actin' as yore lawyer now. An' doin' some heavy thinkin' regardin' how I kin nose-ring this Seminole fer yuh."

"Who asked you to horn into our business?" barks Buck Lambert, his anger flarin' at the wrong time, a habit with weaklin's. "Who's gonna pay fer what yore doin'?"

"A fair question," I admit, castin' my eyes up the hill where Della's comin' down hellity larrup. "My little pardner hired me. An' here she comes now. She's plumb took care uh the fee already."

They stare at me, but before they kin answer, she's off her horse without a word an' her arms are around her dad. She kisses him, then solemly walks to Buck an' kisses him.

"Della," snaps her dad, "did you hire this lawyer to take our case?"

"Hire him?" she repeats, liftin' her brows quizzical.

"As yore lawyer," I put in, cold, "I answer for my client. Miss Della done

hired me with the plea fer help in her eyes. An' she overpaid me with the sweetest smile ever a pore hawssbacker got from a purty filly."

"Della!" demands Buck. "You bin ridin' out an' makin' truck with this feller?"

"What if I have?" snaps the gal, spunky. "It saved yore life, didn't it—yores an' dad's too?"

"Yuh shameless hussy!" snaps the weaklin' brother.

"Which—" I answers for her "—would earn you a row uh buttonholes up an' down yore brisket if you was even half a man. Keep that tongue uh yores hobbled or I'll tie a knot in it."

"Whoa up!" soothes old Mark. "No need to fight amongst ourselfs. Buck, you shet up. No hard feelin's, Jones. We bin upsot a heap an' we're edgy, I reckon. You'll have supper with us, uh course. Della, git a skillit on the stove. Buck, you cut some loin meat off'n that hangin' yearlin'. Then when we've et, we gotta git tuh packin'."

"Packin'?" I holler. "Yuh mean . . . ?"

"We're facin' a deadline," he says, his face like a rock. "An' much as I hate the idee, I gotta face it. Much as I love this country an' this place, much as I'd hoped to leave the children this nest-aig, I can't chance gittin' Buck kilt an' throwin' Della into the hands of that black Injun. I've seed him look at her an' it makes me crawl, I tell yuh. The Committee's give me twenty-four hours. They meant it. After that our lives ain't worth this. . . ." He snaps his fingers.

It takes my breath. "Yo're goin' tuh leave yore spread tuh them snakes?" I blurt, unbelievin' of my ears.

He nods. "Fust thing in the mornin'. My children is wuth more tuh me than ary old spread. The only thing that holds me," he adds, glancin' at them flowers, "is . . . . is Maw. . . ."

"Yuh orta be ashamed to even think uh leavin' her," I shame him. "After all she put up with tuh build it up. Don't yuh think it's easier fer me to lawyer that deadline than tuh save yore necks from the Committee. Stay right here an' tell 'em. . . ."

He shakes his head. "I owe it to Maw," he agrees, weary, "but the children don't an' she wouldn't want 'em tuh take the chance. Mebby I'll come back when I git Buck an' Della safe somewheres, but . . . ." He throws his hands an' turns away to'rds the barn, Buck follerin'.

Della looks at me with hopeless eyes. "He'll go too," she murmurs, bitter.

"He's just that stubborn. That babyin' us is what's made a weaklin' of Buck. I wish I was a man."

"Be glad," I grin at her, "that yo're a woman that men'll make fools of theirselves over. I anted a white chip into this game, like I told yuh. Because you remind me of somethin' I orta have but ain't got. I win the first pot an' I'm lettin' my winnin's ride. I'm no good augerin' folks into doin' what they already know is right but are too stubborn to admit. So I'm workin' on the other end."

"What's that, Showdown."

"If you see me again," I promise, "it'll be safe fer you to come back to the Lazy L. So long, Della."

I reach out fer her hand, a small, capable hand with strong fingers an' a grip like a man. She flashes that smile again an' this time my chest swells two feet.

"You'll stay to supper," she says.

"Not till I've earned that much pleasure," I tell her, dropping her hand an' topping High Ball hawss. "Where's the Rafter G Bar?"

When she tells me, I give the pony a nervous spurrin' to the top of the ridge, where I rein him in to blow. For about a minute I look back at the Lazy L Mark

Lambert an' Buck are down at the barn starin' up at me, askin' themselves, I reckon, what kind of a crazy range lawyer I am anyway. On' Della is standin' there in fringed skirt an' cowboy boots, her oval face upturned to me, her brown hair whippin' in the breeze, her hand lifted in farewell. It's as queer a layout as ever I bumped into—an' as grippin' . . . to me.

I lift my hand in salute, whirl High Ball an' fog it over the rim.

THE low moon is big an' red an' round in the east when Stilts Rodeen comes to me at the top of the black butte, east of the Rafter G Bar. He lights, trails his split reins, comes over an' sets down without a word. Fer mebby ten minutes we set there together, silent, just thinkin' about the same people, the same things—jest gettin' the feel of each other, which is a heap better guage of a man that a lotta chin slobber.

Somewhere a owl hoot busts in on the distant chatter uh coyotes.

"In New Mex," Rodeen says, stirrin' uneasy, as if the nightbird has revived old memories, "Owl in August—rain shore." Which is only his way uh sayin' that his soul is stored full uh sentiments that I'm fit tuh hear.

"In Montana," I give back, "only fools an' tenderfoots set forth tuh prophet the weather."

He laughs, soft. But there ain't much humor in it. Silence falls between us again an' the vision uh Della Lambert, as I saw her in the afternoon, rises up to plague me. Somethin' in her emotion-dewed eyes haunts me, thrills me with old urges, desires I've allus fought. Stilts blurts out almost what's formin' on my tongue.

"Tensleep," he grits, "has a damn, no-'count cowboy without a hitchbar tuh tie to gotta right to look at a purty gal?"

"Well," I chuckle, "I'm a lawyer an' I can't think uh no law ag'in it. Why, you cravin' a look?"

"Hell!" he spits. "I'm cravin' tuh marry a gal, fer the first time in my life. Della Lambert, the sweetest, purtiest, cutest little . . . ."

"Shore," I nod. "But yo're disquaiified. You was makin' a hand at h'istin' her dad an' brother fer box-elder berries."

"Like hell!" he snarls. "When you come down the hill, I was jest unlimberin' my Peacemaker. They mighta hung 'em on me, Tensleep, but Seminole an' two-three others wouldn't 'a' bin pullin' at the rope. Nope, I'm fed up with the Rafter G Bar an' its lousy renegade business."

"An' yo're dreamin' about a spread of yore own, eh Stilts? A tight little cabin with a woman's song comin' outa the windows an' likewise the squawl of a baby . . . ."

"Aw, gwan!" he protests, twistin'. "Don't hooraw me, Tensleep. I'm serious."

"So am I," I chuckle. "Now unlimber yore gabble an' tell me about this Seminole an' the reason fer him pointin' at the Lamberts."

Which he does. He paints a picture of Seminole—as good a cowman mebby as ever was borned—a man trusted by his bosses, who live somewheres in the east. Seminole knows how to make his hands love him . . . . or hate him. Rodeen tells how Seminole, with a handful uh cowboys he's got somethin' on, is robbin' his bosses blind, how hard it is fer the law to uncover his means uh sellin' stole hawsses an' cattle. He's split his crooked earnin's with stock inspectors, with railroad shippin' clerks an' with sheriffs until only the Lazy L is in his way of a fool-proof business, because it's too easy

for the Lamberts to stumble plumb onto one of his night drives.

Speakin' harsh an' bitter, Rodeen tells me how Seminole has used him, knowin' that Stilts has a Wild Bunch record under another name. Seminole has swore to have the Lazy L, even if it comes to murderin' Mark an' Buck Lambert, an' —I can feel Stilts fumin' underneath— Seminole says he'll have spunky little Della fer his own when her men folks is found beside the trail somewheres.

". . . . he frames up this hang-bee," Stilts finishes up, "hopin' to make the Association do his killin' fer him. The Lamberts had no part in that hawss stealin'. That was Seminole's build-up. Me an' two others had them ponies an' was scattered by the Committee's fire. An' I gotta like it. . . ."

"What about them lathered hawsses of the Lamberts'?" I ask.

"I dunno," he admits. "But I've got a idea the Lamberts know when these drives are goin' through an' fear tuh do anything about it. Mebby Mark an' Buck rid fer the sheriff, which they wouldn't uh found him in. 'Cause he was with us, drivin' stole hawsses."

"An' so you'd like to build up tuh Della, eh?" I ask him.

"I shore would, Tensleep. But what've I got tuh offer a gal like that?"

"You got nerve," I remind him. "Which is more'n Buck has. You got fight, which is more'n Old Mark has. An' yuh got *feminus protectus,* which is a lawyer's name fer a darn fool about a gal. I reckon Della can use some of the same. What more yuh want tuh offer? But how yuh gonna offer even that when yuh don't know how tuh find her?"

"Meanin' what?"

An' then I tell him about Old Mark pullin' out fer the "children." Stilts swears like a trooper. "Tensleep," he says, stormin' up. "I know one shore way uh settlin' this."

"Yuh do?" I say, mockin'. "Le's hear it."

"I'll kill Seminole!" he announces.

"An' swing fer it," I sneer. "I can think up crazier ways even than that. An' here's one of 'em. . . ."

For the best part of a hour, we auger back an' forth, coverin' the same old ground. We've got to keep the Lamberts on the Lazy L so Stilts can build up his case with Della. I'm actin' as lawyer fer the Lamberts, councillor fer Stilts an' shyster fer my own interests. Practisin' without a license? Cripes!

HAVIN' augered it to a finish, we fork our ponies an' lope to the flat, sayin' never a word. It's all bin said until . . . . showdown. Where lights show us Tug Saunder's spread ahead we rein in while Stilts explains the layout. Somewhere a bull coyote is bayin' the moon an' the ranch dogs is hurlin' back challenges. An' as the two of us quit our broncs, we're prayin' that old coyote don't tire of his sport. Dogs can be most embarrassin' at times.

We hit the corrals on the far side from the house an' go to work on Tug Saunders' corralled saddlers. Neither of us makes a false move, bein' plumb experienced. We take down a section of the juniper pole fence, walk in among the saddle stock an' start it out the break, slow an' easy, workin' the broncs across the grass pasture to the road. Then, forkin' our ponies again, we haze the Saunders hawsses to'rds Cow Crick Pass —without that bull coyote missin' a yip in his devilin' of the Saunders' dogs.

A hour an' a half later, me an' Stilts rein in where the road splits between the Saunders Ranch an' the Rafter G Bar. We look at each other in the moonlight.

"What yuh tellin' Tug Saunder?" I inquire.

"That Seminole is payin' me tuh steal hawsses an' cattle fer him; that Seminole's cleaned the Saunders corrals an' is puttin' the ponies through Cow Crick in the moonlight; an' that I'm fed up an' refusin' to go through with it."

I nod. "That orta fetch him, Stilts. I'll be seein' yuh . . . . mebby in hell."

"Worms in yore grave, feller," he says, sober.

We cross palms, then part, me headin' fer the Rafter G Bar. I ride into the place bold as dammit, straight to the house where a single light burns. Swingin' down at the rack, I draw a long breath at the door, then walk in. Seminole Durkin, two of his hands that I judge to be the ones he's got somethin' on, an' two full yards uh muscle an' sinew wearin' the badge of the sheriff uh Piedra, jump up from the table where they're playin' cards. Their hands jest naturally plummet to their guns, which inhospitable move I discourage with the eloquent barrel of a .45.

"Set, gents," I tell 'em. "An' don't be unfriendly. I'm here in my official capacity."

"What is yore capacity?" asks the sheriff, narrow.

"Likker, lead or business?" I smirk.

"Business!" he barks.

"I'm here," I grin," representin' a client."

"The Lamberts?" hollers Seminole. "Tuh hell with 'em. I've give them hawss-thievin' snakes twenty-four hours tuh vamoose. If they don't . . . . well, it's too bad. You an' me has already done too much talkin' about them."

"Not the Lamberts," I deny. "But another client this time."

"Who?"

"Stilts Rodeen!"

"Stilts? What about Stilts?"

"I'll do his talkin' fer him this evenin', gents."

"Like hell," barks Seminole. "Smoky, go to the bunkhouse an' git Stilts."

"Smoky won't find Stilts," I assure him. "Stilts played sick tonight in order tuh git off an' play in the moonlight with Showdown Jones—his lawyer. We figgered you boys had done so good runnin' hawsses through Cow Crick Pass, we might as well make us a few easy dollars ourselfs. So we raided Tug Saunders' corrals an' run off the finest bunch uh saddle stock in the Piedras. By the time we get 'em into Cow Crick, we kinda git skittish, not quite having' confidence in the proper angles from there out. So I'm here tuh cut you boys in on the profits fer helpin' take 'em through. How about yuh?"

"What?" bellers the sheriff, jumpin' up. "You tell me, a sheriff, that you've stole some hawsses an' offer tuh split? Why . . . ."

"Set down!" I order him. "Don't pull no high an' mighty on Lawyer Showdown Jones. Why I know more about you than Piedra does. No, don't stiff-neck me, Sheriff. Or I'll spring somethin' that'll rock yore ancestors in their graves. I'm in a hurry. Make up yore minds . . . . yes or no."

The lawman wilts down an' looks at Seminole appealin'. But the Rafter G Bar ramrod's eyes encourage him. They're eager, darin' an' greedy.

"Where'd yuh say these hawsses are?" he asks.

"In Cow Crick Canyon," I tell him.

"Le's go look 'em over," suggests Seminole, an' when the sheriff nods, turns to his boys. "Saddle four fast ponies," he orders. "We'll go with Showdown Jones an' see what he's got."

HALF hour later the five of us cross the Lazy L. The nester's house lies dark an' unfriendly in the moonlight. An' I'm wonderin' if there's any sleep inside

it fer the three Lamberts. Dark thoughts stir up my mad—that gals have to bear the burdens of greedy range hogs.

With the sheriff ridin' ahead, the two Rafter hands flankin' me an' Seminole behind, we clatter up the rocky bed uh Cow Crick until we come to the Saunders hawsses, spread out an' feedin' along the talus. Out of the shadow of a cottonwood comes Stilts Rodeen.

"Hullo!" he says, grumpy. "Thought you'd never git here, Showdown. Look 'em over, Seminole. Were burnin' the night hours in dangerous territory."

"Boogery, eh?" laughs Seminole. "Keep yore shirt tail tucked in, Stilts. Humph!" He runs his eyes across them feedin' ponies. "Them ain't broncs. This is Saunders' cavvy. An' I mean he'll be orry eyed. Which I'm honin' tuh see after the way he let me down in the hangin' uh Mark Lambert an' his kid. Shore, boys, we'll he'p yuh out. But not fer more'n a fifth fer the two of yuh."

"How about yuh, Showdown?" asks Stilts, speakin' loud.

"Oh . . . . all right," I answer, an' can't quite keep the nervousness outa my voice.

"Let 'er go!" hollers Seminole. "Sheriff, you point 'em out. Smoky, you an' Tom take right swing. Stilts, you an' Showdown left swing. I'll fetch the drags along. Hika! Git along ponies. Hi-ya!"

The boys start whoopin' the hawsses away from the talus an' into the canyon bottom. Stilts vents a Injun whoop an' whistles shrill. From both hillsides comes a crashin' uh brush as riders send their hawsses out from behind oak scrub, an' wild yells as they charge down the hill. Guns glint in the moonlight.

Pinched in, the Saunders cavvy mills nervous. Seminole an' his men freeze, startled. Then Tug Saunders' voice is runnin' down the slope:

"Yo're hipped, Seminole! Stretch yore arms to the stars . . . . pronto!"

Seminole yelps, like the screech of a file on hard steel—"Trapped, by cripes! Git that Showdown, boys. An' Stilts!"

His gun starts speakin'. Likewise the sheriff's as he tries to gun his way clear. But a volley from the hillside dumps him off his pony. One uh Seminole's men throws up his hands to'rds the moon, screams shrill an' topples. Then the shootin' is all over an' more'n a dozen of Tug Saunders' men have got Seminole an' the one called Smoky. Havin' lagged behind the hawsses when Seminole started 'em, I catwalk High Ball into the gloomy shade of a cottonwood an' set there watchin' the play sweep past me.

Now I edge down the canyon an' around a bend, put High Ball up the slant. At the top I rein in an' look back. The hawsses have bin turned down canyon an' are squealin', kickin' an' bitin'. Tug Saunders an' his men are ranged around their two prisoners in the first light of the dawn. Slow an' solemn, they lead 'em beneath a tree. An' the cries of a doomed coward are awful things tuh hear. . . .

Now Seminole's hollerin' is stilled an' the Saunders men walk out—fork their ponies. Two swayin', bobbin' forms gyrate in the dawn breeze. Seminole an' his renegades is gone an' the air seems fresher an' sweeter along Cow Crick.

AS THERE don't seem to be no further use in the Piedras fer Lawyer Showdown Jones, I turn High Ball down the ridge trail, headin' to'rds the valley. Just as the red disc of the sun pokes up over the timbered hills, I'm lookin' down along the windin bosky of Cow Crick. Below me is the dust of a bunch uh hawsses hazed by Buck Lambert. Pointin' that drive is a wagon loaded to the guards with household effects, tooled by old Mark Lambert. Della, astraddle a

paint pony, is ridin' quite a ways behind, her slim shoulders saggin' sorta pitiful.

Now a rider lopes outa the Cow Crick timber to intercept Mark Lambert's wagon. It's Stilts, an' he's wavin' his hands excited as Old Mark sets the brake. The hawsses scatter out to feed as Buck comes spurrin' up to have his empty say. They're fightin' quite a lippy battle down there when Della lopes up. Stilts rides to her, talkin' fervent. She ain't so fervent. He edges close, lays an arm around her waist. An' . . . . wallop! She lets him have it alongside the ear. Boy! That lick musta shook all the leaves off the Rodeen family tree.

The yell I turn loose musta drifted down to them. Because I see Della look up. Then she's killin' her pony, racin' him straight up the hill to'rds me. Her dad an' brother are watchin' her—discouraged Stilts is makin' no move to foller. An' me . . . . cripes! I'm shakin' with the buck fever, shakin' like the fever an' ague, an' lookin' around fer some hole tuh crawl into. An' I'm still only lookin' when she roars up.

"Was Stilts tellin' the truth?" she demands.

"If he told yuh he loved yuh, Della," I say soft, "I reckon you can bank on it bein' the truth. He . . . ."

"Not Stilts," she slurs. "I mean . . . . Seminole."

"Yes'm. I reckon Seminole's done deviled his last range. Yore dad can turn them wagon broncs around an' go back to his Lazy L. An' he'll be needin' help."

"Yes," she says, eager.

"An' he can't find no better hawss an' rope help than Stilts yonder. He's . . . ."

"Bother Stilts!" she snaps, impatient. "What about you . . .?"

"Me?" I say, startled. "Why I'm headin' east, I reckon. My spurs is itchy with travel an' . . . ."

"That never gets a man any place," she says, serious. "Battin' from pillar tuh post—saddle whackin' for strange bosses with nothin' tuh tie to. What you need is tuh settle down an' . . . ."

"You tell it interestin'," I grin, embarrassed. "Sometime mebby I'll . . . ."

"Are you ever comin' back, Showdown?" she asks. "Back to the Piedra Hills?"

She lays her fingers on my sleeve an' I look into her eyes. They are smoky eyes warm with human feelin' an' . . . . well, somethin' that scares me spooky. With things turnin' over inside me, I hear myself say:

"Yes'm. I think I'm comin' back."

"There is rewards here for what you've done," she says, trembly. "I'll be waitin' for you."

"Don't yuh do it, ma'am," I warn her. "Don't waste yore life waitin' to reward a maverick—not when yuh gotta steady hand to tie to."

High Ball, restless an' pawin', responds to the spur, darts away. On a far ridge I look back. Della's still settin' her hawss lookin' after me. I lift my hand an' she answers, impulsive an' eager. An' down on the flat, Stilts makes the lightnin' stroke sign of the Wild Bunch. Then I put risin' ground between us, a heavy feelin' in my chest. Sometimes a feller finds it hard to leave a place even when he knows the sign ain't right tuh stay—especially when the sign on far horizons allus is fair an' appealin'.

THE END

Tensleep Maxon rides his High Ball horse straight into more trouble

In The Next Issue • • • • Out October 12th!

RANGERS—

by Harry F. Olmsted

(Author of "Scissorbill Sheriff," etc.)

Young Wedge Wooten, despite his heart's desire for peace, headed out on his last law-trek alone, save for the Colt insurance on his thighs and the golden-eagle badge over his heart — to test his Texas courage in the death crucible that was the Valle Inferno.

HE LIVES in the brushy forests of the Big Bend, slipping like a wraith along its dim trails, sounding his weird cry to its lonely hills. The natives call him paisano—a term of affection, meaning countryman—and never molest him. For paisano, the chapparal cock, is man's friend and the sworn enemy of snakes, skunks and vermin, a guardian of the out-trails.

Mayhap that is why they came to call a certain legendary rider of the Texas law trails Paisano. The nickname became associated in time with a silent man-tracker, one who slid through the *brasada* with the silent mystery of the chapparal cock. Like that friendly bird, he preyed on snakes and skunks—the two-legged variety. He was a man without fear and endowed startlingly with the fatal gift of gunswift—a legend comforting to the law abiding and fear-inspiring to the lawless—a man without identity who appeared uncannily, did his work swiftly, terribly, then vanished. Paisano!

Under the cottonwoods of *Cuerno*

KEEP OUT!

Smashing Novelette of the Texas Law Trails

Verde, the air sweltered. Flies droned in the canvas office of Company B, Border Battalion, Texas Rangers, where a grizzled man dozed, his scuffed boots lifted to the plain pine desk, eyes closed, jaws working at a quid of fine cut. Ranger Captain Duane Larribee was hot and drowsy and bored. Nothing doing in the Big Bend since the boys smashed Hawk Tortez and his Border hoppers at Rocky Hill Crossing, three months before. If something didn't open up soon. . . .

The muted click of a latch, the faint slither of a footstep caused Cap Larribee to open his eyes. He dropped his feet to the floor with a bang. Pleasure flushed his face as he rose, stuck out his hand to the grinning giant who stood across the desk from him. It was the son of old Shootin' Hoot Wooten, the man Larribee had entered the service with better than twenty-five years before.

"Wedge!" he cried, wincing at the grip of this bronzed youngster. "Glad tuh see yore shadder, son. This place is so dead it stinks. I shore envy you younkers yore saddle whackin' an' gun smokin'. How yuh bin? How about that wild *bandido* in the Larue Hills?"

Wedge smiled. "He tamed nice, Chief. I sent him word I honed to tame him down. He tore into town, drank hisself brave an' hunted me up. . . ." Wedge paused, his face expressionless.

"Yeah," encouraged Captain Larribee. "An' then what?"

"Then, he had about a minute to regret his past life. After that they give him the finest funeral Larue ever seen. I'm fed up on funerals, Chief. Hand me pen an' aper, will yuh?"

"The report, yeah." The Captain handed Wedge writing materials. "Make it detailed. An', as fer funerals, a few more is all Texas needs tuh stay healthy."

Wedge Wooten only grunted, went to writing. The Ranger Captain paced the floor. Wiry, square-jawed, gray as a north country wolf, this pint-sized lawman had plenty of funerals behind him, funerals staged for the good of Texas, funerals that rode lightly on his direct-action conscience. But he could remember back when he too had wearied of funerals and recognized a danger signal. The thought of losing this splendid young officer alarmed him strangely. . . .

Duane Larribee's mind went back to the day when he had last seen this boy's father, Shootin' Hoot Wooten, alive. How alike they were—tall, tireless, indefatigable, silent, unemotional, filled with the something that has made Texas ahorse a heroic legend. Both were stamped with the red brand of courage.

Wedge was only twelve when his dad rode out alone after Chihuahua Joe Kinter, the dope-runner. His meeting with that outfit, in the Mex town town of Arboles, is still a legend of hot lead and burnt powder smoke. A grim smile touched Captain Duane Larribee. Shootin' Hoot had broken up that traffic, killing Chihuahua Joe and two of his men, wounding four others. But he had paid with his life.

Captain Larribee recalled how the *Rurales* had delivered Shootin' Hoot's body at the border, how Wedge's face aged as they buried his dad. Years later, the fifteen year old youngster entered the service as a tracker, his reckless career unfolding as he carried ranger law into the *brasada,* until he had become the mysterious, dreaded figure—Paisano. And now. . . .

CAPTAIN LARRIBEE took the paper from Wedge. Took it with a face as expressionless as granite. The note was too brief to be a report. He read it hurriedly, started, read it again. He squinted.

"Son," he said, weakly, "I'm sorry I can't read this. I've mislaid my glasses an' can't read a lick until. . . ."

Wedge snorted. "You counterfeit ol' man-wrangler," he scoffed. "If ever you wore cheaters it was to fool some addle-brained son into takin' you light. Right now you can shoot the tail feathers off'n a buzzard with yore old cross draw an' flip-cock. But long as you can't read, I'll test yore hearin'. That's my resignation. I'm cuttin' my string, pickin' out a patch uh grass with cows to graze it, buildin' me a little shack an'. . . ."

Duane Larribee's eyes sparkled. "How many rooms to the shack, son? An' who's the filly that's done this thing to the service . . . an' you?"

The youngster flushed. "Nothin' tuh that," he expostulated quickly. "It's just that I . . ."

Captain Larribee nodded. "Never mind, son. That's yore business. But I was countin' on assignin' yuh one more job, an' feel like yo're lettin' me down."

"What is it?" Wedge's eyes were eager.

"Yuh mind Hell Range, Wedge?"

"Valle Infierno beyond the Chocolate Hills, where Senator Ike Koerner makes a tough neighbor! No thanks, I'll graze my dogies where wolves an' rustlers is the worst a feller's gotta buck."

"Might be interestin' to look 'er over, Wedge."

"Interestin' such as how?"

"A day after you went after that Larue

hellion, I sent Private Kim Illo yonderly answerin' the request uh Sheriff Pecos Potts, of Tecota. Since when I've. . . ." He fell silent, brow furrowed with the cares of Company B, Border Battalion.

Wedge squirmed. "Well," he drawled. "You've. . . . what?"

"I've had one note from Kim. Said Hell Range was well named an' no better than rumors. Said a night-ridin' gun crew is roddin' that country high, mighty an' reckless, an' he was figgerin' tuh horn in on the game an' peg the leader of said gun crew. Since when I haven't heard a word. That ain't like Kim. Frankly, Wedge, I'm worried."

WEDGE digested the idea. Kim was his service saddle pard. Together they had bearded *brasada* trouble. Each had weighed the other in the game where chance hovers uncertainly and death passes only the strong. Each knew and respected the other's courage.

"Kim's all right, Chief," Wedge declared. "He's likely horned into that hell business to nail up the hide uh the big striped skunk uh Hell Range. Give him time."

"It ain't time," worried Duane Larribee. "It's hunch. Mebby if Paisano was to ride in there casual. . . ."

Roaring hoofs outside interrupted Wedge's answer. A rider lit running, plowed to the door, popped inside. He was a big, dark-visaged man with droopy hat and faded denims that stunk of sheep. Weary, dust powdered, excited, was Paolino, the Basque, whose woolly flocks ranged the rugged Chocolate Hills.

"Señores," he gulped. "I have the word *por El Capitan* Larribee!"

"Here!" snapped the Ranger Captain, and took the blood-stained fragment of shale the Basque held out to him.

For a long moment he perused its message, his face blank. Then, silently, he handed it to Wedge. Hungrily the youngster read an incomplete report, scratched feebly as if in agony, and tailing off into an illegible line. It read:

Chief —
He's covered clever but I nosed him out.
The man we want is K . . . .

Only that. No more. Bitter rage rode the ranger known as Paisano. That pitiful missive was a cry for help. Yet in his soul Wedge knew brave, steadfast Kim Illo was already beyond mortal help.

"Feller!" Wedge's harsh command shook the Basque into fearful attention. "How'd you get this? Talk up!"

The man gulped. "It was in Tecote, where I go *por* flour and bacon and *frijoles*. Eet ees night. I ride back to my sheep campo. I hear a cry. I find these man, weethout clothes. Planty knife mark on heem. The soles of hees feet shave off. Hees tongue cut out. He no can talk but he write weeth blood on these rock. He die een my arms. I scoop out hole een sand and bury heem. Then I ride here. *Es bastante.* There ees no more. Eef those *diablos* of Valle Infierno find out, they keel Paolino. . . ."

"You have done well, Paolino," commended the Ranger Captain, handing him a gold coin. "No one will know. *Adios!*"

When he was gone, the eyes of the two rangers met. Larribee's grizzled face white. Wedge's almost unrecognizable with its fighting mask of Paisano—mystery guardian of the out-trails.

"Well, son," croaked Duane Larribee. "Kim's gone, looks like. What we doin' about it, you an' me?"

"Please, sir," hummed Paisano. "Le's dig that bottle outa yore desk an' drink to the memory of a friend. . . . a man."

Cap Larribee nodded, produced bottle and glasses, poured the drinks. Wedge Wooten raised his glass, eyes vitreous, voice brittle.

"Here's to one last funeral," he toasted, "an' squared accounts."

"To the quick," responded the veteran eagerly, "an' the dead!"

They drank. Their eyes met in a look of complete understanding. Wedge touched the last message of Kim Illo, shifted the big guns at his thighs.

"It's a gamble, son," murmured Duane Larribee. "Mebby I better send the troop an'. . . ."

"Clean out the Valle Infierno?" Wedge lifted his brows. "Nope. That'll singe the innocent with the guilty. Nope. Paisano takes the trail to hell. I'll be seein' yuh, Chief."

"Luck to yuh, boy. An' if yuh need help. . . ."

Their hands met. Then Wedge was outside, swinging into the saddle. Boiling dust swirled by the hot southwest wind hid his going. And when it had settled, he had vanished. Paisano had come and gone. The *brasada* had claimed its own.

CHAPTER TWO

Gun Welcome

WEDGE WOOTEN gigged his roan up the last stiff pull to the ridge-top, reined in and lit down to let the animal breathe. After easing the latigo, he turned his eyes outward, downward. Three thousand feet below stretched a vast mountain-locked depression. A valley—cruel and unfriendly as its reputation—made of jagged, scar-faced granite heaps, desolate sand reaches, tremulous with heat waves and dervishing dust devils. Dry and heat-seared, with more than a hint of the world's first fiery dawn, was Valle Infierno—Hell Range!

The only break in its barrenness was the puny stream snaking along the valley axis, achingly inviting with its cool, green bosky. But elsewhere was only sand and rock—warped and mutilated as if by some destructive demon hand. Somewhere in that satanic playground, Wedge told himself, was a smaller, less conspicuous pile of rocks placed by man to mark the grave of poor Kim Illo. At the thought, Wedge's smile faded, to be replaced with the heavy frown, the brooding eyes, the jutting jaw of that feared law gun—Paisano. Awe gave way to killing thoughts as he shifted the big guns at his hips.

Through powerful glasses, he searched Valle Infierno, his pale eyes reflecting the harsh and bitter vista. Yonder, along the river fringe, tiny verdant rectangles bespoke orchards and pastures. Miniature dun-colored ranch houses blended cunningly into the rock-littered landscape from which they reared their ugliness. These houses were homes—some belonging to decent folks, some owned by devils in human form. The problem was to separate the sheep from the goats—and to determine the true identity of the K. . . . in Kim Illo's pitiful uncompleted scrawl. K. . . .? Could it be Ike Koerner—state senator, militant cowman whose voice carried plenty weight in the legislative halls of Austin—and other things that men whispered of—uglier things?

The thought stirred Paisano strangely. It seemed almost heresy. Yet stranger things had been unearthed by this ferret of Company B. The ruthless hand of the man who lusts for power, the unreasoning intoxication of the man who drafts his own codes, who administers the law of the gun often made beasts of men who otherwise may be kindly and useful citizens.

Paisano's shoulders sagged under the weight of his problem—then quickly straightened. His roan stirred uneasily, shot his ears forward. From down the mountain side came the click of shod hoof on stone. Paisano stiffened, his chill gray eyes flicking to the sound.

Up the trail came a lone rider, grim, gray, moulded to the saddle shape. His gaunt frame slouched wearily. His narrowed blue eyes were heavy, embittered. A deputy sheriff's badge glittering mockingly on his vest caused Paisano to chuckle mirthlessly. Here was the law riding up from Hell Range, where the only law was *Lex Taliones*—Law of the Fang.

The rider came on. Now he espied Wedge but gave no sign of surprise. He drew abreast, reined in his heaving pony, nodded silently as he eyed Wedge up and down, contrasting weathered, brush frayed Levi's with full-stamped, concha-trimmed leather. He glanced momentarily at the two Colt guns with their polished butts. When he spoke, his voice was brittle as the rocks out of which he had ridden:

"Comin' in, stranger? Or goin' out?"

Wedge shrugged. "That depends, neighbor, on jest where you-all range."

"I range the Valle Infierno," snapped the oldster. "An' she's plumb crowded."

The ranger's eyes narrowed. "Crowded?" he drawled.

"You heard me, younker. Crowded. Easy to git into. A downhill pull goin' in an' a stiff climb comin' out. . . . if yuh git out."

Paisano made no answer. Some vague, half-heard sound born of wariness drew his attention. Yonder, behind a huge boulder, shone a human eye looking over the sights of a leveled rifle. Paisano's mouth twisted coldly. His hands jerked spasmodically, froze over the grips of his guns. His voice came now, low and deadly:

"Easy in, eh?" he cooed sneeringly. "An' with a downhill pull? I'll take that as it lies, Lawman, an' auger that yore pardner is only funnin' from behind yon rock. But if he ain't, I doubt if even his long gun kin damage me enough that I can't sift a hot slug under yore hide. . . ."

Silent laughter shook the lawman. "Boogery, eh? It's well to be thataway here, younker. I've lived long here because I've got a shadder with a steady trigger finger. Insurance we calls it down yonder. If you was goin' in an' hadn't took out no insurance. . . ."

Wedge patted his holsters. "Owl Jones carries his insurance where it's handy to the draw. Yeah. . . . double insurance. Enough fer me, with plenty left tuh hire out."

The oldster studied. "Owl Jones, eh? A wise bird, the owl, of the night flyin' variety. I'm Sheriff Pecos Potts an' know the breed when I see 'em. I've seen gun-slammers come. . . . an' go. Without bein' too nosey my advice tuh you is tuh bunch it. However if yo're totin' insurance an' hone tuh sell it, I'd suggest Jarvis Karns, of the Kennel Saloon. Jarvis might need a bit more insurance than he's carryin' . . . ."

"Jarvis Karns," mused Wedge. "I'll remember the name. . . . when I stick my nose in the Kennel. An' many thanks to you. . . ." He jerked the latigo, swung into the saddle, a prickling sensation along his spine as those rifle sights followed him faithfully. Pecos Potts lifted his hand in farewell.

"No trouble, Owl. See yuh some more . . . . mebby. If yuh lose confidence in yore insurance in Tecote, come tell it tuh Pecos Potts. I might mebbyso know of a trail out, a trail that ain't too crowded."

"Thanks," Wedge grinned, spurred away.

HE didn't look back. Rounding a bend in the switchback trail, he pondered, digesting the old lawman's veiled warnings. They added up to but one thing—Hell Range was jumpy. Strangers weren't welcome. A ranger had died and over the Valle Infierno hung the menace of that

lone avenger—Paisano. Wedge had passed the first barrier safely, chiefly because Pecos Potts was honest, courageous as any man could be, hemmed with the deadly dangers of Valle Infierno.

Wedge recalled the letter received from Pecos, the note that had caused Captain Duane Larribee to dispatch Kim Illo on the fatal trip to Hell Range.

"Send in a man," it had requested, "to look us over. Things is bad here an' outa hand. Alone, I'm jest one of the culls. With Texas behind me, I might make a stab uh puttin' the bug on the big devil uh Hell Range. . . ."

There was more, but that was the meat of it. Kim had answered—as smart a manhunter as Company B could boast, had died broken and tortured, writing his last report in blood, with a frightened Basque easing his last agonies. Kim had found the answer and paid with his life. Now Paisano was taking up the task with only a single letter to guide him. K. . . . ! It stood for Karns—Jarvis Karns, gambler, saloonman, clever schemer, whose shadow had fallen over more than one wide range along the Rio Grande. But, to Wedge, it stood for Killer—one who had destroyed a fine, clean lawman. There was a debt to be squared, a friendship to be proven. And Wedge murmured a silent vow to be worthy of Kim's regard. . . . or die.

Now as the sun rode down, Wedge came to the valley floor where whiney wind riffled whispering sand through the anemic brush. Restlessly the roan loped along the narrow trail, head weaving nervously, ears ever busy, snorting with the deep-sensed terror of the place. Twice he shied, leaped from the trail. Twice Wedge shook a gun free, only to curse his nerves.

Night was fluttering from the east when Wedge heard the first whisper of racing hoofs. Cautiously, he drew behind a sumac, just off the trail, where he sat quietly alert, ready, hand resting on his gun butt.

Now a wildly running horse flashed down the trail, its rider hanging low, spurs rolling, quirt swinging, a small rider, nattily attired, delicately made. A girl? Wedge gasped, straightened. The girl, eyes sweeping the trail, caught the movement, swerved. As she flashed past, Wedge caught her glance for one brief yet lingering moment. She was pretty, graceful, her light brown curls whipped in the wind over the bobbing *sombrero* held by the strap around her neck.

But her eyes got Wedge: wide hazel eyes, terror-filled yet hard with the courage born of sweeping ranges—eyes surprised to encounter a stranger here—eyes changing dynamically to prayerful supplication—an unspoken plea for help. And then she was past, the drum of her pony's hoofs coming back stridently.

Now those drumming hoofs were silenced. The girl's shrill scream sheered through the silence and Wedge heard the crash as beast and rider went down in the trail.

Whirling his pony to the girl's aid, Wedge suddenly froze. The swift pulse of pursuit came to his ear, a single galloping animal. Now a big horse came plunging about a bend, big, but not too big to carry his rider—a man huge with flesh and bone carrying no hint of inertia or sluggishness. The newcomer was too flashily dressed for the hand run of cowboys. A gunman, maybe, with close-set, pig-like eyes, red with the lust of possession, searching the trail. He was killing his horse in mad pursuit of the girl.

Across the trail of this hurtling hellion, Wedge Wooten rode.

THE hard-roweled horse reared, pawed the air, whirled as the ranger blocked the trail. His rider fought him quiet with

spewed curses, sat the heaving beast, his vitreous eyes scoring Wedge. And Wedge stared back, calmly, silently, a brittle light in his eyes.

"Goin' somewhere, cowboy?" he hummed, thinking of the girl. "Or was you jest travelin' fer yore health?"

"I'm travelin', feller," snarled the gunman. "An' aim tuh stay healthy. I'm burnin' trail an' burnin' down them that stop me. You hone tuh try yore hand thataway?"

"Try?" Wedge snorted. "Hell, man, I've done got yuh stopped."

"Right. . . . temporary. You've plugged the free trail. Took cards where the deck is stacked ag'in' the uninvited. Which is inconvenient tuh me an' unfortunate fer you. But I'm big hearted. Shove outa the trail; hit a high lope fer the rim an' I'm overlookin' yore mistake."

"Thanks!" Wedge smiled thinly. "Bein' a good hawssbacker, I'm thinkin' first uh my pony. When he's rested, I'm movin'. Not before."

"Why, damn yore soul . . . !" The man's anger flared, but behind it lay a spark of caution. His eyes flicked to the brush. "Sa-a-ay, you got a pard bushed out there somewhere?"

Wedge hardly heard him in the turmoil of his own emotion. As the last glimmer of the afterglow played upon the man's coarse features, something stirred in Wedges' mind. He thought of the "List of Fugitives" and unconsciously murmered a name known from the Panhandle to the Big Bend, from the Paso del Norte to the salt grass ranges along the Gulf. It was the name of a renegade, rustler, horsethief, killer—fitting cohort of the Hell Range bunch.

"Black Drogan!"

The man started, stiffened. By every manner he betrayed the indubitable signs of the trapped criminal who will argue arrest through smoke. He tried to sneer, made a poor fist of it. His fingers curled avidly and he licked his lips with a tongue suddenly gone dry.

"Who?" he croaked, "in the hell are you?"

"I," said Wedge softly, "am Paisano!"

Ready as Wedge was; ready as he always was for gun trouble when the red signals of danger fly, he was hardly fast enough for Black Drogan.

"Paisano. . . . God!" rasped Drogan. And as he croaked, he spurred his pony, flung himself across the withers Injun style. As his horse caromed into Wedge's, Drogan flipped out his left hand gun. And Drogan was fast. How fast only dead men might argue. The mechanics of his reach and throw were like light playing across water. But to him, his arm seemed leaden, blunderingly slow. For he looked at the draw of Paisano—proven cock of chaparral guns.

Not draw, for Wedge didn't pull his gun, just tilted it, rocked the hammer and fired through the open holster-end. He was playing no part, as he believed, in the grim game that had drawn him to Hell Range and making no heroic play for an unknown girl whose hazel eyes had pleaded so eloquently for aid. This was only following the injunction of the "Fugitive List." Black Drogan must be brought in dead or alive. Yes, and fighting off the death that ever stalked him, that sometime would lay him with his father —Shootin' Hoot Wooten.

There was only one shot. . . . Wedge's. His lead blasted Black Drogan from leather, dumped him kicking, dead before he lit. His horse danced away a rod or so and stopped, too weary to be terrified. As the echoes of that lone shot ran up the brushy gullies to die, Wedge punched out the empty and reloaded. His face was bleak. Here was the thing that he detested. Someone must take life, but he'd had enough. Disgust rode him like a demon

in that brief moment. But a thought of Kim Illo calmed him and made him realize again that he had come here to kill, that this was only a starter. The challenge of Valle Infierno was clear, unmistakable —kill or be killed!

Crashing brush caused Wedge to turn his head. A horse trotted yonder, saddle empty, stirrups flapping. Wedge caught the animal, led it downtrail. A figure moved out of the gloom to meet him, a slight figure, disheveled and limping. It was the girl with the hazel eyes.

SHE stood like a slim statue, looking at the sprawled dead man, when Wedge swung down beside her. She didn't look up as he dropped the reins of the two ponies and twisted a cigareete. That interested Wedge. For in her contemplation of Black Drogan there was no horror, no pain, no sign of joy or regret, but just an impersonal study of one who had come to a tragic if needed end.

Wedge felt courage radiating from her, knew that she belonged. Though her presence seemed foreign to this sordid barrenness as the free, cool air of the Chocolate ridges, she was patently part of it. Why, Wedge couldn't understand.

The twilight had failed and as Wedge thumbed a match to light his cigarette, the tiny flame accentuated the gaunt ruggedness of his face. And then she looked up and into his eyes. The man and a maid were reading each other over the brief flare of a match. Each was interested in what he saw.

"I was afraid, Miss," said Wedge softly, "you might be hurt when yore pony pinwheeled."

She shook her curly head with impatient negation. "How?" she asked, half scornfully. "Can a man who kills so casually be afraid for a girl falling off a horse? Don't try to be nice. . . . just on my account."

Wedge grinned, admiringly. Snuffy—spirited—quick under the hat—were the qualities Wedge demanded in a horse. . . . and a woman.

"Do I feel unnecessary," he grunted, poutingly. "Casually, eh? The way this feller was chasin' you ain't my idea uh casual."

"Was his chasing me your business?" she demanded, falling back upon a woman's inconsistency in argument. "Or even his catching me?"

"If you knowed him, ma'am," countered Wedge, "or me, you'd know that didn't matter. . . . much."

"I do know *him*," she retorted. "He was a drunken beast, masking disrespect for decent women, and God knows what worse under a ranger's badge. I trusted him to ride beside me, thinking a ranger at least a gentleman. When he got fresh, I slapped him and he cursed me. Then I quirted and ran for it. Yes, I know this ranger for all our short acquaintance."

For a moment, Wedge was stunned. Then a growl rolled up from his chest, a reflection of a blind rage. "Texas Ranger. . . . him?"

"Kim Illo, Texas Ranger."

"No part uh Kim Illo, ma'am" exploded Wedge. "This 'un's just a damn. . . ."

He bit off the appellation, knelt beside the dead man, turned back his vest. In the quick flare of a match, he found the eagle badge of the Rangers pinned there —Kim's badge! Wedge trembled as he rose.

"Yore mistake, ma'am," he choked, "wasn't in trustin' a ranger. But in takin' this feller's word he was Kim Illo. Kim was a white man, one any woman could trust. Had I knowed this one was wearin' Kim's badge, I wouldn't uh shot. . . . tuh kill."

"Why?"

"Because," he answered bitterly, "he died too plumb easy for what I reckon

he done tuh Klim. This is Black Drogan, rustler, bushwhacker, whose guns has allus bin fer hire, a man wanted fer bounty money in a dozen counties uh Texas. . . ."

"For all my dislike of him," she interrupted, "why should I take your word against his? He's worked with Uncle Pecos uncovering those who are selfishly ruining this valley—Range hogs that plan to run decent folks out of this country. I know he's helped Uncle Pecos, who told me they'd found something. . . ."

"Uncle Pecos bein'. . . ?"

"Sheriff Potts."

"You know?" Wedge was eager. "You learned what they discovered?"

"No. And wouldn't tell you if I knew. Whatever it is, I'm certain your job is to seal the lips of those who know. That means Kim Illo and. . . . Uncle Pecos. I don't care about this beast ranger, but I do about the sheriff. You get out while you can, Mister Killer!"

She stepped around him, reaching for her pony's rein. Wedge whirled, shot out his hand, caught her by the shoulder.

"Wait a minute, Miss. You can't leave thinkin' that! You gotta. . . ."

"Take your hands off me!"

She struggled to break away. Failing that, she swung the quirt on her wrist. It cracked against Wedge's cheek, leaving a red welt. Up went his left hand to fend off the swinging lash. Then he caught her wrist, had her imprisoned, pulled to him. The faint aroma of her was in his nostrils. Her breath was hot in his face as she struggled against his strength.

Maybe it was the big red moon that sailed over the rugged caps of the Chocolate Hills. Maybe it was the uncontrollable wave of emotion that welled up in Wedge, admiration of her fighting spirit. She was something to be tamed. From the age of fifteen, Paisano hadn't known a wildling that had stood out against him. And training is a powerful guide to passion.

With a sudden, savage crush, Wedge folded her in his arms, imprisoned her against his chest. Despite her heroic struggles, he turned her face up, stifled her irate expressions with passionate kisses until she wilted in his arms, until she lay uncontestingly in his arms—a frail figure sobbing out her heart.

And then horror struck Wedge. He put her from him, staring dismayed at her downcast, tear-streaked face. The cry that welled from him was abject.

"Before God, ma'am, I musta bin crazy. I'm sorry. So sorry I'll do anything. Please don't cry. Put the quirt tuh me! Give me the hawss whippin' I deserve. Please ma'am. . . ."

"You're a. . . . a beast!"

"Yes'm. I know it. I'm plumb sorry. What kin I do to make it up to you?"

"You'll make it up. . . . when I tell Uncle Pecos. They'll hang you for this!"

"Yes'm," Wedge's face was grim. "An' I'm givin' you that chance. You've got it comin'. But I had to tame you so you'd lissen. Kim Illo was my pardner. They killed him in here somewhere. Likely this feller with his star done it, but I can't prove that."

"You . . . you're a ranger?"

"Yes'm. An' a pore example right now."

"You better ride from Valle Infierno," she flamed, moving again toward her horse. "If you're here in the worning, I'll. . . ."

"I'll be here in the mornin'," promised Wedge. "An' from then till I've run down them behind Kim Illo's death. I've got plenty respect fer yore Uncle Pecos Potts, too much tuh chance gettin' him killed by hornin' into his game or askin' him to horn into mine. I'm playin' it lone hand. If I win, Valle Infierno will be safe fer honest folks. If not, you'll know the feller that manhandled you got his needin's. Here—" he unpinned his badge, pressed

it into her hand, "—what I am is in yore hands. Likewise what happens to me. If it looks like I'm openin' up the sore that's plaguin' Hell Range an' that I'm needin' help, use yore judgment about sendin' this badge to Cap Duane Larribee, Company B, Texas Rangers, at Rio Cuerño. If I cash my chips, send him word how. . . ."

She stared at the badge, then at him, an unreadable look upon her face. Wedge halted, suddenly thrilled with the thought that she had forgiven him, that she might approve his trustfulness. Then suddenly she whirled, flung herself to horse, snatched the rein and hurtled away under spur. Behind her floated a shrill laugh, hysterical, scornful, taunting.

That laugh stabbed Wedge to the quick as he stood staring after her, harkening to the last faint whisper of hoofbeats. When silence had claimed the range, he walked to his horse, stood stroking the beast's arched neck. In him were repercussions of the passion that had swayed him to madness. In him was still hunger for this strange, hazel-eyed girl who seemed so out of place in Valle Infierno, yet so perfectly a part of it. But overcoming all other feelings and emotions was loneliness that she was gone, humiliation that she had laughed, and growing wonder that he had placed in her small, strong hands his plans, his star, his future, his life.

CHAPTER THREE

An Ally

UNDER a tawny, high-riding moon, Wedge rode toward Tecote. His hand never far from his gun. His spirit alternately depressed and exhilarated. Following the narrow, twisting trail to the heart of Valle Infierno, where the stronger law was at the hip, where life was cheaper than good leather.

As he rode, Wedge thought of the hazel-eyed girl, wondering about her name, wondering if he'd dare speak to her again. And it was memory of her brave eyes that reassured him. If she was Sheriff Potts niece, she must be heir to that twisted oldster's admirable qualities. Wedge smiled.

"She's good an' she's smart," he murmured into the backturned ears of his mount. "An' while I played the plumb fool, she's gonna know we're all short uh brains some way or another—an' that a man kin live down one mistake."

Swinging down the one street of the drably silent town, Wedge discerned silent and posted figures lolling against the canopy-shaded fronts. Like fireflies, the gay tips of their cigarettes ebbed and glowed. Somewhere a woman's voice uplifted shrilly in unintelligible protest, and as abruptly cut off. That sound, stabbing the stillness, seemed to accentuate the unnatural calm, the restraint and, to this invading manhunter, the warning of the place, as if Tecote waited for someone to come. Paisano perhaps?

The town was dark, but for a garish light before a towering false front. And through a swarm of insects, Wedge made out that here was:

KARN'S KENNEL FOR COWDOGS
JARVIS KARNS—PROP.

Wedge swung down at the rack, trailed the rein. As he turned toward the door of the Kennel, he shed the bold assurance of those who walk straight paths. He had seen too many lawless riders not to be able perfectly to ape their furtive, nervous attitude. And so he let himself into the smoky air of the barroom. The unhealthy silence of the place struck him like a searing desert breath and he was conscious of the impact of quizzical, unfriendly eyes.

Through that silence, he shuffled to the bar, bought and swallowed a drink. He

eyed them with a lazy, devil-be-damned scrutiny, and what he saw bore out his preconceived notion of Valle Infierno. Pariahs, killers, dopes, men without code or creed jammed the place. And these dangerous derelicts were putty in the hands of a smart schemer like Jarvis Karns—or a dreamer of empire like Senator Ike Koerner.

The tention relaxed, though they still regarded Wedge narrowly as he left the bar for a rear table where a poker game continued grimly in spite of the stranger's arrival. There were five in the game—the houseman, sober and alert, three uninterested players who didn't count, and a slender youngster hardly yet twenty-one. Tall, red-eyed from bad likker and weariness, he cuddled his cards, shoved out a stack of red chips from his still bulging pile.

It was an old, a sordid, yet a gripping drama Wedge Wooten looked at. They had fed the kid bad whiskey, had led him to fire. But now his winnings were slipping through his fingers as they whipsawed him with everything from cold decks to filling from the discard.

"She's open for a hundred," he mouthed thickly. "Get yo' feet wet, gents."

They did and the draw was dealt. As the houseman dropped two cards for himself, the youngster kicked back his chair, red spots burning in his gaunt face.

"Wheah Ah comes from, felleh," he bit out, "the dealeh works from the top of the deck. . . ."

A sigh shuddered around the room. The houseman stiffened, face granite, his hard black eye lacing the weaving kid.

"You insinuatin', kid, that I'm . . ."

"You in-bred son of a coyote-buzzard cross" snapped the angry youngster. "Ah neveh insinuates. Ah'm tellin' yuh straight, yo're a lousy cheateh. Ah'm. . . ."

"Yo're drunk, kid," Wedge Wootin said.

"Drunk or sobeh," retorted the youngster, "Ah knows tinhorn cheatin' when Ah sees it."

"That's shootin' talk!' rapped the tinhorn, and tugged at his neck cord, jerking a tiny but deadly knuckleduster from the pocket of his ornate vest. But the kid wasn't too drunk to be handy. As the tinhorn palmed the Derringer, the youngster let him have it. The slug smashed the gambler's gunhand, hammering the Derringer against the wall.

The gambler showed agony for an instant. Raging, he leaped for the floored weapon. The kid shot again and the tinhorn swore luridly. Across the room a Karns gunman jerked a pistol. Again the eagle-eyed kid fired, and that threat was down, a bullet in his chest.

"Two shells yet tuh crack!" he yelped, showing white teeth grinningly. "An' takin' on all comers! Who's next? One at a time or all together. Step out, gents, an' try yore trigger luck. . . . !"

One of the cappers, having worked to the youngster's rear, struck now at his holster. It was death for the raging yet justified youngster. And a pang shot through Wedge that one so young must die . . . . on such a nice moonlight night. To think with Wedge was to act. He was only a step from the murderous capper. He stepped close. His weapon flashed out, rose, fell. Poleaxed, the man sank down without a groan.

Now Paisano's deadly guns weaved the ranks of grumbling gun hellions. Startled at the violence behind him, the kid whirled, stared amazed at the consternation this stranger had thrown into the Karns hirelings. Wedge was snarling at them.

"The kid's right," he rapped, "even if redeye's got him half bogged. I don't know him or you either. But outmatched thisaway is lopsided odds in any lingo. I'm trimmin' said odds. Yon sobbin' slob-

berin' tinhorn won't play no more poker an' hadn't orta. If anybody thinks different, I'm ready tuh auger it!"

In the momentary silence, no man seeing fit to accept his challenge, Wedge spoke to the still hesitant kid.

"Pick up yore marbles, kid, an' back outside. I'll cover yore play. Fer you the cards read heel-kicked dust."

From one corner of the smoke-gloomed room a soft voice spoke, a purring voice heavy with authority . . . . and scorn.

"That ain't necessary, stranger. Yo're both safe here as in God's pocket, long as Jarvis Karns rods the Kennel."

All eyes flicked to the door of a cubby opening off the rear of the bar-room. A man stood there, tall, straight, handsome save for a certain droop-lidded malevolence. He smiled easily, pulling at a short Van Dyke with a faultlessly kept hand. Jarvis Karns' nervous eyes swept the hard-eyed habitués of the place.

"You all know better than this," he reproved them. "You're not hired to mix up in private brawls. Or to back the plays of a crooked houseman whose gunswift lags behind his card savvy. Everybody up to the bar. Dal, pick up your chips an' I'll cash you out. Let no man say Jarvis Karns ain't fair or that he runs a sandbag outfit."

They rushed the long bar. The kid scooped up his chips, cashed them, then joined Wedge who had taken a stand at the outer end of the bar. In the youngster's eyes was gratitude, admiration. The bartender poured their drinks and Wedge lifted his. As the kid reached for his glass, he met Wedge's eyes, read a warning there. He flushed, poured the likker down the bar front.

"Dal Slater is beholdin' to yuh, felleh," he said, embarrassed. "Ah've bin a fool, Ah reckon. An' all on account of a—" he flushed, "—a woman. Ah'm so crazy about her Ah'm loco. Can't think uh nothin' else." He smiled wanly, extended his hand.

"Call me Owl Jones," Wedge grinned, gripping his palm. "You don't owe me nothin'. I've found bloodsweatin' gunhands like ponies. A tight rein at the right time halts many a runaway. I figgered yore trouble was likker . . . . an' cards. But wimmen . . . . that's bad. If it'll ease yore mind any, tell me about it. But before yuh start, no woman's worth goin' tuh hell fer."

"It ain't that," flushed Dal Slater. "Ah admit Ah drunk too much. But not tuh drown my sorrows, Jones. Ah've loved this gal fo' a long time, but . . . ."

"Can't make her see it yore way, eh?"

"Oh my gosh," expostulated Dal. "Ah ain't got nerve to proposition her. Lordy no! But Ah've worked fo' her fatheh, know him right smaht. He knows how Ah feel to'rds his gal. He 'lows her heart's her own an' won't dictate none who she marries. But 'lows he'll dictate propeh that she neveh ties up with no hawss-smellin' cowprod that ain't got a thousand dollahs. Ah had fifty, an' the only way Ah knowed tuh add nine-fifty was gamblin'. An'—" his eyes lit hopefully, "—now Ah've got it, with a few dollahs oveh."

Wedge's face settled. Along with the change in him, his abhorrence of further killings, his determination to change his calling to that of cowman, had come a deep and abiding hope that there might in time be for him a home and family. A tight little cabin with a friendly light shining from its windows at night. A girl. . . . And now as the dare-devil light faded in his eyes before the rush of something finer, something bigger, he found a picture fitting into that dream. The picture of an irate, hazel-eyed girl pitting her hard, vigorous muscles against his greater strength—and losing.

"Son," he told Dal Slater. "You got the money, the gal, the love an' the hope.

All yuh need is nerve. Scratch it with sharp rawls an' make yore play. Go see her. Pour out yore heart. Git down on yore prayer bones. Tangle yoreself in an apron string loop. An' when yo're roped an' hogtied, legal an' proper, don't struggle tuh git loose. Fer a single man ain't no man at all. He's only a overgrowed boy an' . . . ."

He clipped his words as a horse roared up before the Kennel. A rider lit running, rattled across the boardwalk. Sheriff Pecos Potts scuttled into the saloon, limping from an old ambush wound, narrow shoulders, hunched with years, sagging with responsibility he had never shirked. Honesty and square dealing were deep branded on his seamed face. With him law was a fetish. Many a desperate man had cursed the urge that drove this twisted shell where younger, stronger men would have quit. And one of these was Jarvis Karns, who had backed Pecos in the mistaken belief that age is weakness. Another was Senator Ike Koerner. . . . range hog.

Sight of Pecos standing there, head up, eyes snapping, thrilled Wedge strangely. He seemed in that moment to see in this old man the things he'd seen in the hazel-eyed girl, back yonder. The blood that ran in their veins was pure strain. Pecos was talking.

"Gents!" his voice rang clear. "I want a posse. Night riders burned out the T Bar T not two hours ago. Old Trip Tanguary an' his boy Tom was downed. The old lady an' the gals was turned loose on the trail to walk to the Rafter 9. I met 'em. But they was so scairt an' rattled they couldn't tell me nothin'. Only thing tuh do is tuh cut fer sign uh such low-down skunks."

He paused, waiting for volunteers. Dal Slater detached himself from the bar, his face convulsed.

"Ah'll ride on yo' posse, Sheriff," he sang out. "An' take a heap uh pleasure in salivatin' them that done it."

No one else spoke. All stood shifting uneasily. From the rear of the place came again that scornful voice of Jarvis Karns.

"Pick 'em out, Sheriff. They'll go . . . . or stay, permanent."

Pecos Potts nodded. "An' that ain't all, gents. Back trail five-six mile, I find the body uh Kim Illo, Texas Ranger that's bin investigatin' hereabouts."

His eyes jerked to those of Karns. The notorious gambler blinked, then assumed a pained air.

"Illo!" he gasped. "No. . . . Pecos. Who done that? Ranger killin's goin' too far. Any sign left of the killers, or did you have time. . . .?"

Pecos nodded, grimly. "I built a fire an' read sign enough. The killer's hawss had a left hind shoe with a wore down heel. I seen that hawss once before today, talked with its rider. The pony is standin' out here at the rack now. The killer is standin' at this bar. . . ."

"Name him!" bawled Karns, advancing. "If there's a ranger killer here we want him put away. Bushwhackers has gotta go."

Pecos Potts shook his head. "Not bushwhackin', Jarv. This feller faced Illo an' killed him before he could shake out a load." His eyes went to Wedge Wooten, standing stiffly at the bar. "Owl Jones, I arrest you fer the murder uh Kim Illo, Texas Ranger. An' don't make me kill yuh by reachin' fer yore insurance . . . !"

CHAPTER FOUR

Paisano Trails

FEARLESS, zealous, Pecos slid toward Wedge, his hand on his gun. A convert of the old days, he liked the going rough, and the rougher it was the better he liked it. His eyes were dangerously

bright and Wedge, prey to a million thoughts, watched him with bitter fascination.

In those seconds that seemed hours, Wedge fought a terrible battle with himself, a battle to prove that the years had taught him more than just how to thumb a .45. Here was an oldster committed to law enforcement, pitting himself against the law for the benefit of the lawless. Wedge laughed at the weird humor of it —and fought against the deadly urges of Paisano, the killer.

Every muscle, every nerve of his body screamed to him to draw, to play out his string in smoke. Two things aided him to resist the urge. One was the laughter of the man who had ordered Kim Illo slain—laughter at a sheriff and a ranger shooting each other to death. The other was the girl, kin to this deluded sheriff.

Five steps away—three steps—Now Pecos Potts stood before Wedge and the crowd along the wall stood tense, braced against an expected explosion, which never came.

Disdaining the range axiom that the fast draw is the plaything of youth; scorning the knowledge that the years had fastened him with the deadly inertia that sooner or later dooms all gunfighters; knowing in his soul that this man calling himself Owl Jones was dynamite, Pecos whipped out his Colt's and jammed it into Wedge's belly. From his unmoving lips came a whisper for Wedge's ears only.

"Steddy, feller! If yo're Paisano, as I expect, it's me an' you ag'in this hell herd."

"I've got Paisano's chores to do," Wedge whispered back. "Who's behind this hellaciousness? Who killed Kim Illo . . . . the real Kim Illo?"

The old sheriff's eyes batted. "A guess at best, Ranger-man. I'd guess Ike Koerner!" Then in a loud voice as the saloon denizens stirred restlessly: "All right, Mister Killer-man. Git started. From here out yo're boardin' at Mr. Tecote's jailhouse!"

Thrilling to the message of that faint sibilance, Wedge wondered how Pecos had divined that he was Paisano. He turned to obey. But both he and Pecos figured without Dal Slater. Back against the wall, the kid flashed his gun. His teeth were bared and death was in his voice.

"Up, Sheriff! Steddy, you buzzards! First man crossin' me dies! All right, Jones. . . ." and as Pecos dropped his gun and shot up his hands, ". . . git goin'. This makes us even an' both tuh stirrin' dust."

Unable to figure the effect of this interruption, Wedge nonetheless nodded, leaped to the door and out. After all, there was Senator Ike Koerner to be attended to first. Dal, covering him, followed close behind, throwing a pair of shots to discourage pursuit. Together they raced to the rack, flung ahorse. The animals shot away, their riders feeding steel. Behind them the Kennel boiled men. Pistol shots streaked the night, the lead wild. Paisano had ridden to Tecote alone, had spent a brief period in Jarvis Karns' Kennel, had learned what he honed to know, and now was riding out. A loyal friend was riding with him and another was left behind.

PURSUIT distanced, their horses settled into a long, mile-eating lope, Wedge and Dal rode half an hour before speaking. Following the wagon road along Hall Creek, each was busy with his own thoughts. Then Dal spurred close, a chuckle shaking him.

"Owl," he chortled. "The night-flyin' part uh this fits yuh, felleh. But Roadrunneh comes closeh. Paisano!"

Wedge started, searched the youngster's face in the moonlight.

"What yuh mean—Paisano?" he demanded.

"No need tuh play-act," Dal beamed. "Ah knowed yuh right off. . . ."

"Howcome?"

"Yuh mind comin' to Rinconcito, fo'-five yeah ago? It takin' you ten minutes tuh shoot that town oozy with law an' order. Yuh mind the kid that throwed in his double-barrel scatteh gun? Yeah? Well, that was me. How could Ah eveh fo'get yuh, 'specially afteh Ah learned it was Paisano Ah'd helped? Howcome yo're Owl Jones an' not Paisano?"

Wedge grinned. But there was no humor in his voice.

"After Hell Range, son, Paisano is dead. An' mebby Owl Jones dies with him. Paisano's a killer, an' like a wolf, prey fer all men—lawless, them that crave reputations—even good folks who hate a killer. God helpin' me, Paisano will never ride again. Takin' life is dry rot, Kid. Hang up yore gun, marry yore gal, settle down on grass somewheres an' grow up with the country."

"Queah advice comin' from Paisano," countered the youngster. "Whyn't yuh foller it?"

"I will if the girl will have me. After I finish my chore here."

"Me too," exclaimed the Kid. "We're in the same boat. Yo' advice is good, Ah betcha. An' Ah'm takin' it. Things is bad here an' gettin' tighter. Ah've bin some worried about my gal an' her dad. If she's willin', Ah'll take her outa this. Ol' man Ike Koerner's likely too stubborn tuh sell out an' leave Hell Range. But his gal's got her own life tuh live—with me, Ah hope. Ah'll lay my gun away after helpin' you clean up Hell Range."

"Yuh mean," Wedge's voice crackled, "yo're in love with Ike Koerner's gal?"

"Dawn Koerner. Y'betcha."

Fate plays strange pranks on earth-bound mortals and Wedge Wooten knew it now: this fine clean kid in love with the daughter of the man Wedge was convinced he must destroy before ever Hell Range could know peace. And, all unwittingly, Dal had thrown in his gun to aid in its accomplishment. What a mess. Wedge sighed, visualizing the Kid's biting disappointment, yet knowing that even if Dawn Koerner were his own passion, he still couldn't resign from what he knew to be his duty, the last grim mission under his oath, the real test of his friendship for Kim Illo. But Dal Slater. . . .?

"Kid," he said soberly," things here is due tuh warm. Hell Range'll be no place fer a buddin' bridegroom. See yore gal tonight. Ride fast an' far with her an' take no chances."

"Good gosh, Paisano. When was Ah so scairt. Lissen, Ah don't reckon she'll have me. I jest ain't up tuh askin' her, though I'd face hot guns fer her any ol' day. Holy cow, what Ah need's experienced help, felleh!"

"What yuh need," snorted Wedge, "is a kick in the britches. Git started. I'll foller along an' mebbyso put in a word if yuh git tongue-tied."

Dal gulped, his courage oozing away like sugar from a rent sack. But he led the way at a lope, fighting back his fear of the girl he loved, whipping himself toward his terrifying chore.

Now he left the road, following a *barranca* trail, proving familiarity with the going. What a help, Wedge thought, the Kid would be in the stirring events to come. But how much better for him to be safely out of the mess. The way led upward, through cuts and cross erosions until, just as the first gray streamers of dawn fluttered in the eastern sky, they debouched onto the breaks of a water meadow. On the first bench of the Chocolate Hills.

Here, many cattle grazed. And in the early light, Wedge made out a number

of prominent Texas brands. But most interesting were trail-weary cattle wearing T Bar T on their ribs, cattle of Trip Tanguary and his boy Tom, both murdered scant hours before. The two riders drew rein beside a series of jagged basaltic uplifts where the view of the meadowland was unobstructed.

"Kid!" Wedge broke a long silence. "What's in that pass yonder?" He pointed to a V-notch in the crest of the Chocolates.

"That," answered Dal, "is Ike Koerner's outlet to rail, Pacheco Pass."

"An' we're near Koerner's place now?"

"Right at it, Paisano. Just t'other side uh these rocks. An' am Ah s-scairt or am Ah paralyzed?"

"Scairt uh Ike Koerner?" asked Wedge, amused despite the grimness of his mood. "Or scairt to propose marriage tuh Dawn?"

"N-n-neither. Just scairt tuh face her. That gal's nacherally got me buffaloed, Paisano."

"Grab holts on yore shirt-tail, kid," grinned the manhunter. "Yo're goin' down an' git it off'n yore chest if I gotta fork yore carcass an' spur yuh—an' propose to Dawn fer yuh. I'll need practice, at that. 'Cause when I git time, I'm lookin' up this niece uh Pecos Potts an' layin' my heart at her feet. . . ."

A SOUND so faint as to be felt rather than heard, caused Wedge to clip off his hooraw. Whirling, his big Colt's flipped from its scabbard and Paisano's trained thumb trembled on the worn ferrules. A fraction more speed, a split second slower coordination, and Paisano would have crashed lead betwen a pair of eyes—hazel eyes that stared over the sights of a saddle gun. It was the girl of the night before, the girl Wedge had kissed until she ran through his veins like wine.

Trembling a little, Wedge holstered his gun, shot a look at Dal Slater. The kid stood transfixed, eyes bugging, face red in the knowledge their conversation had been overheard. Then Wedge looked again into the desperation-filled eyes of the girl.

"Well," she clipped scornfully. "Now that you've laid out your heart, start saying Dal's piece for him."

"But, ma'am," protested Wedge. "That was only fer Dawn Koerner."

"I'm Dawn Koerner."

"You? I thought you was Pecos Potts' niece. . . ."

"Your mistake," she said stiffly. "Because I called him Uncle Pecos. He's Uncle Pecos to everybody an' his heel dog. Because they like him."

"Now ain't that tough, kid?" asked Wedge mournfully. "Us lovin' the same gal an' not knowin' it. Yuh reckon we better take tuh fightin'?"

"Not any," gulped the kid. "Me, Ah got enough fight with my ownself."

"Oh, Paisano, manhunter and woman fighter, wouldn't hurt you, Dal," cooed Dawn. "He'd shoot you right painless. Paisano, what you doing on Rocker K?"

"I'm here," answered Wedge, grimly, "to look yore outfit over. An' to make medicine with Ike Koerner. I think him an' me has got some straight talk tuh swap. . . ."

"About what?"

"Well . . . . about yon T Bar T cattle, fer instance. Drove right off at the legs after Trip Tanguary an' his boy was slaughtered. Restin' on Rocker K pasture on their way through Pacheco Pass tuh rail."

The girl flinched. "Tanguary's are dead? My father knows nothing of that. Nor of their beef."

"I hope not, ma'am. But it'll take fast talkin' tuh convince me."

"You can't see him," she answered.

"Because, if you try, you'll get him killed . . . . and yourself too."

Sensing terror in the girl's tone, Wedge stepped closer. "What's behind all this, Miss Dawn?" he said, seriously. "Tell me."

"No! Please go away. If you stay here, you'll die!"

With a swift leap, Wedge snatched her rifle. Then as she recoiled in fear, he took her arm. "I wouldn't hurt yuh, ma'am. But some things is bigger than us mortals. I'm goin' to the house an' see yore father. You'll stay with Dal. Talk to her kid. Tell her yor feelin's. An' more power to yore love makin'."

He spoke jauntily, but his heart was leaden as he turned away. As he threaded the basalt uplift toward the sprawling ranch house, he was certain he had lost the only girl he'd ever . . . well, dreamed of. But Dal was clean, unsullied by hunting men down and killing them. With a brave girl like Dawn. . . .

Forcing the girl from his mind, Wedge eyed the big ranch house. In the early light, there was no one visible. A movement on the skyline, perhaps a mile away, caught his eye. Silhouetted against the rising dawn, was a body of horsemen riding toward the Koerner ranch at a high lope. Wedge hurried his stride, reached the house, paused at one corner to listen. Footsteps behind made him whirl. It was Dal Slater.

"Lissen," he whispered. "Dawn's agreed tuh stay yonder, so Ah come on. The's somethin' sho' nuf wrong, Paisano. An' my gun belongs with you. Le's git at it, befo' them ridehs reach heah. . . ."

Wedge read him like a book—scorning to use his rival's absence to make headway with the girl he worshipped. Wedge gripped his arm in silent approval, pleased with this unselfish young partner. He led the way about a corner, stepped upon the stone-flagged, tile-roofed colonnade that ran the full front. Boots echoing noisily, they headed for the heavy plank door at the main entrance of the top demon of Hell Range.

It was quiet, peaceful. The peace before the storm that would set the air pounding with gunfire. Somewhere a hooligan coyote assailed the sunrise with mournful matin. And to Paisano, that was more suggestive than the false peace of the Rocker K. Death would strike . . . . Nay, death had struck!

Behind Wedge sounded two swift shots. From a deep recessed window a groaning man slumped across the sill, his rifle clattering. And Dal stood straining tight as steel wire, the smile smeared off his face. Added years stamped in his kid eyes. He had killed. He had saved the manhunter he admired. But there was no applause from Paisano.

With a clipped, "C'mon, kid!" he darted to the door, his gun palmed, his eyes weasel cold, his voice lifted in that stirring ranger challenge: "In the name of Texas, Ike Koerner, I want you!"

His shoulder hit the door and he forged inside. With the wicked flash of gunfire in his face, with the powder stink in his nostrils, with his own gun bucking, with Dal Slater in swift gun action at his flank he perched on death's doorstep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rocker K Hell

SOMEHOW that shot, from the murky hall missed Paisano. Nor did the posted guard fire twice before Paisano's guns opened. The guard coughed, wilted down. From another door came a cursing leaping figure, gun gnashing. Dal Slater fell as Paisano drove life from this newest menace.

Than in the brief silence Paisano leaned over and spoke sadly: "They get yuh . . . hard, kid?"

"Hahd, hell! That wild coyote shot off my heel. Me—Ah'm holdin' the Border Battalion fo' a new payeh uh boots."

"You ain't up tuh that bridge yet, Dal. We got three possible outs. One's too hot fer boots. The other they don't allow boots fer fear they'll scratch the Golden Stairs. If we take the third, I'll sign the order fer them new boots. C'mon."

With Dal limping behind him, Paisano led the way into the big main *sala*. It was empty, dirty, unkempt. Through an open door came a whisper of sound, the clank of chains. Paisano tensed, faced the portal. Like a wolf, he glided to the threshhold, Dal folowing, fascinated. Now Paisano's savagery fell away. His strange stare and awed—"Who in the hell are you?" drew Dale. A man stood facing them. A weary-eyed, gray little man marked with culture and breeding. His kindly, tolerant features were haggard, drawn. Only his burning eyes told of unquenchable courage, of battles won and lost.

"Good mawnin', suhs," he drawled politely. "Who-all's askin' fo' Senatoh Koerneh?"

But neither Dal nor Wedge could answer. From Ike Koerner's ankle ran a chain, fastened to a ring in the stone mantle. Ike Koerner, cattle baron, state senator, was a prisoner in his own home—chained like a dog while wolves fattened at his expense and dragged the name of Koerner into the dust of the Valle Infierno.

Reloading his gun, Wedge pouched it, shook himself. Then, without a word, he turned to search the bodies of the three house guards. In a moment he was back with keys, and Ike Koerner was free. Shaken by his sudden deliverance, the cowman sank into a chair, mopping sweat. Then, stifling his emotion, he lifted his head.

"Thank you, suhs," he murmured graciously. "To whom am Ah indebted fo' this favoh? Oh, Dal, it's you. Ah was distuhbed, didn't recognize yuh. An' yo' pahtneh?"

"Paisano, Misteh Koerneh!"

"Paisano!" the cowman started, clutched at Wedge's hand. "Ah'm glad to know, suh, that yo' reputation hasn't been exaggerated."

"What is this?" asked Wedge, still puzzled. "Whose work is this?"

"It's a long story, suh," replied Koerner. "An' one Ah'm responsible fo', Ah reckon. Twenty years ago Ah came to Hell Range. It made a devil of me. Ah prospered, fo'got that a man cannot be a god. Ah lusted for wealth . . . . poweh . . . . honoh. Did things fo' which Ah'm rightly doomed to suffeh, Ah reckon. Ah hired men, put pressuah on the weak. Ah bought my way into the Senate an' used State poweh fo' my own enhancement. Then, fo' selfish reasons, Ah got a pahdon fo' a scalaway named Karns—Jarvis Karns. An' he . . . . he's done this to me. He rules Valle Infierno, suhs. Ah haven't dahed talk. But when he stahted bothehin' my girl—Dawn—then Ah kicked oveh the traces an' he chained me up. Wheah's Dawn?"

"Safe outside," answered Paisano. "Why didn't she tell us?"

"Didn't daeh! She feahed it would result in my death . . . . an' yo's."

Paisano nodded, whirled as the courtyard filled with horsemen. The cowman darted to the window, turned, his face blanching.

"Go quickly, suhs," he commanded. "Out back. These are Karns' riders. With ordehs to kill. Save yo'selfs. Ah don't count any mo'. But look afteh Dawn, Dal, if you love her like yo' say."

Paisano shook his head. The girl, unless discovered in the basalt, was safe enough. But for them to try running

through these Hell Range killers was suicide. They were trapped.

OUTSIDE a rebel yell! They had discovered the dead man across the sill. Boots clattered as men darted for the door. But Paisano beat them there, slamming it, dropping the bar. Dal was closing the back door, pulling shutters. Koerner was getting down rifles. Already rifle fire was swelling outside. Now Ike Koerner, shucking oratory for gun talk, knelt at a window, making his shots tell. The kid's gun was speaking. And Paisano passed from window to window, loosing swift death.

The engagement was brief. The Karns men took cover to pow-wow. Then, leaving guards they mounted, rode away, taking the trail through the basalt. Paisano and Dal looked at each other dumbly. Was Dawn still there? If so, they were helpless, and knew it. The doubt left a heart ache. But not long was it doubt.

From her covert came the girl, roweling her pony. Yelling, the Karns' men gave chase. And the three straining men cursing bitterly as they overtook her, dragged her off her horse and carried her struggling over the rise toward Tecote—lair of the he-wolf of Hell Range. In an hour she would be in the hands of Jarvis Karns—the K. . . . of Kim Illo's last report. Swift action would follow their account of the Rocker K revolt. Or—and the thought troubled Paisano—Karns might close the passes, throw out an iron ring and hold Dawn hostage till sniper bullets or starvation left him supreme in Valle Infierno. Dal hitched up his guns, growling audibly:

"Ah'm goin' out an' afteh 'em, Paisano."

"Yo're standin' yore hand till dark, Dal," snapped the manhunter. "Then we'll give 'em a whirl."

"Paisano's right, son," put in Ike Koerner. "They've left dead shots. It's death to go befo' night. We gotta tough it out."

And so they fretted away the long, hot day and finally left the big house in the first darkness preceding moon rise. Like three wraiths, they crept along the adobe wall, darted across the open toward the horses in the basalt. Two animals were still rein tied and as the three men walked toward them, death brushed them with its grisly wings.

A single cry: "Let 'em have it!" split the silence startlingly. The darkness lit with crimson muzzle flares. Lead screamed at them.

"Down!" ordered Paisano. "An' hold yore fire!"

Dal Slater complied instantly. Ike Koerner stumbled forward, went to one knee. For an instant they rested, guns ready, eyes probing the gloom. Then three figures swept at them. Paisano fired first, then Dal. Ike Koerner was last, and like his companions dropped his man. The way was clear. Paisano forked the roan pony express. The beast must be hungry, thirsty, in need of care. But this was no time to be squeamish of horseflesh. Dal mounted, pulling Ike Koerner up behind. He labored with his right hand, glad that darkness hid his numb, blood-sticky left. There would be riding, fighting this night, and though dizzy, Dal wanted to miss no part of the game the great lawman, Paisano, planned to play to a finish.

They swept away, Paisano leading, Dal hanging to his flank with the swaying senator hanging tightly, blindly to him. They rode swiftly. In the east the moon was rising, touching dark mesquite thickets with silver. Waving grasses gave back the eerie light phosphorescently. Paisano held to the lead, curbing the roan to the pace of the kid's double-loaded mount. He thought of the masked terror in Dawn's hazel eyes, of her warning that interference would mean death to her

father . . . . and to him. And understood her meaning.

Deep compassion swayed him at thought of her loneliness. And he felt a tender desire to shoulder her trials. He was a boy burning with youth's mating cry—a man, grim with the urge of a killing mission. The soft and the hard blended in an emulsion of turmoil—the lover and the lawman who could know no love.

Now where the way lay across Buffalo Creek, Ike Koerner lost his hold, fell. Dal hollered and Paisano swung a circle and came back.

"Good Lord, man," he complained, kneeling beside the writhing senator. "Why didn't yuh say you was hit? Is it bad?"

"High up, Paisano. You an' Dal keep a-goin'. I'm all right, but Dawn . . . ."

His voice trailed off and the younger men sensed the mental torture of this father for the girl—his only real tie to a life that had broken him. Paisano was torn with momentary indecision. The answer came swiftly. Here, brush hidden, Ike Koerner had a chance. In the hands of Jarvis Karns, what were Dawn's chances? He spoke to Dal. Lifting the senator off trail, the bandanna-bound his wound, made him as comfortable as possible. Then they rode again, Paisano grim as death, Dal fighting down his pain.

Now the trail was gloomed as tumbling cloud masses blotted out the moon. Lightning winked along the horizon and the gusty wind from the east was redolent of wet *chapparros*. Thunder muttered distantly and it was suddenly black dark. And deathly still, with the breathlessness preceding an electrical storm. Dal spurred beside Paisano.

"We're goin' tuh get it, feller," he called. "An' there'll be lightnin' till hell ain't got no door."

"'Scairt uh lightnin', kid?"

"Not if it ain't pointed at me, I aint!"

"Ever see lightnin' knock a gut-eatin' buzzard outa a dead tree?"

"Nope. Did you?"

"Yo're goin' to!" promised the ranger, and he fell silent as the storm struck with a scream, a roar of rain, the white flash of celestial artillery and the thunderous roll of cloud wagons.

THE coursing streets of Tecote were tenantless, men being glad to hold indoors and swap lies of other more famous storms of the Bend. Which suited drenched Paisano to a T. With Dal to guide him, he rode past the jailhouse, hoping to find old Pecos Potts. But the place was gloomily black.

They quit their horses in the alley, tethering them in the lee of Jarvis Karns' huge Kennel for Cow Dogs. Soaked through, face streaming, Paisano waited for lightning to study the upper floor of the Kennel where Karns' personal quarters were located. Now a bolt struck down and the ranger had his picture. Three windows faced the back—all dark. A rustic beam jutting beyond the roof at the peak would be Paisano's entré.

Unbuckling his rope, he shook out a loop, cast it at that projecting beam. Three times he missed. The fourth time he snared it. Then with a last, "set tight, kid," he grasped the rope and walked up the wall, Dal watching him intently. Foot on the second story sill, Paisano listened, tried the middle window. It rose easily and he stepped in.

For a long moment he stood there conning the black void. Then lightning gave him a momentary glimpse of the interior. It was a bedroom, empty of occupants. He looked below. Dimly he glimpsed Dal and the two hip-shot ponies. Then a back door opened, letting out a flood of barroom light. A man stepped out, cursing the weather. And then, as lightning flared,

he saw the kid standing there, gun in hand, like a ghost. Bawling, he whirled, darted back into the barroom, hollering incoherent alarms.

A bad break, but Paisano didn't booger easy.

"Monkey up the rope, Dal!" he called down. "It'll soon be hot enough tuh burn rain down there."

"Can't," gruffed Dal. "They winged me at the Rocker K. Flesh wound but my left arm's weak as Chink coffee."

"Bad news some more," grunted Paisano. "But if you don't hone to stoke the Devil's cook stove, wrap that rope around yuh so I can pull yuh up."

It was soon done and as Dal hit the upper floor, the Karns men burst outside to gun-ring the suddenly-darkened saloon. The two waiting horses and the open window told their own story. Gruffly the word was relayed inside. Heavy boots shook the stairs. The second floor would soon be filled with creeping, desperate men.

Together, Paisano and Dal moved to the door, opened it. A distant flare of sky light showed them a long hall, off which gave doors to four separate rooms.

"Now you'll know what Hell Range means, kid," whispered Paisano. "Stay right here. When I open with them buzzards warm yore iron."

He was gone, mysteriously silent as the chaparral cock. He crossed the hall, let himself into a room. Behind him, Dal's gun roared as the Karns men hit the stair head and as swiftly ducked down, their weapons spewing lead at Dal's gun flash. Then they had drawn their boots and the faint slithers of their presence were like whispered promises of death.

SWIFTLY, Paisano searched this new room. In it were desk, chairs, a table and the strong smell of stale smoke and likker fumes. A door gave into an adjoining room. Paisano entered like a wraith. As he groped forward, he was conscious of the draft from the silently opened hall portal. Someone had come in. Was it Dal? Or was it . . . ?

Crouching, he slid to the room center, holding his breath. The storm had drawn to the south, leaving behind a soddenly falling rain. And through its patter, Paisano sensed a presence in the doorway he had just quitted. He was between fires. To his left, he heard the sudden sibilance of a drawn breath. Then a nerve-strained voice:

"Who . . . . who's there?"

It was Dawn, and he heard the creak of bed springs as she tested her bonds. He dared not indulge his urge to answer, to go to her aid. Slipping a shell from his belt, he tossed it toward the hall door. At its clatter, a gun belched redly from the office door. Lawless lead spatted against renegade flesh and a man went down, groaning. But even as he fell, he loosed the slug that sent the man in the office doorway backward to spill, coughing and moaning.

"God . . . oh, God!" prayed the girl.

Paisano leaped to the bed, felt for the knots that bound her.

"Steddy!" he whispered. "I'll have you loose in a jiffy."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Paisano!"

"Thank God!" she sobbed gratefully. "I prayed that you were what you claimed . . . . that you'd come."

He tore away the ropes, lifted her to her feet. Again that madness caught him and he fought down the rash impulse to fold her to him, to never let her go. His voice trembled with reaction.

"This come to a head quickern' I thought," he said. "This is showdown. Don't know if there's a chance to cut you free. If I go, I want it with my badge

on. Where is it?"

"I . . . . I gave it away."

"To who?"

"To Uncle Pecos."

"Where's he at? Why ain't he givin' us a hand?"

"It was last night after you . . . . you escaped. I gave Uncle Pecos the badge and sent him to Cuerno Verde!"

"Cuerno Verde?"

"To Captain. . . ."

A distant yell seemed to finish her explanation adequately. Then the swift tattoo of galloping hoofs, the shouting of men the sharp staccatto gun bursts, drifted up through the night.

"Company B!" laughed Paisano, thrilling to the first light against a gloomy background of dread. Then he stiffened at a sudden furtive sound from the hall . . . . and the office.

"Quick!" he gasped. "Lie on the bed till. . . ."

Silent as a cat, he glided through the office door, stood frozen there, listening for a recurrence of the sound that had alarmed him. But sounds were blotted out in the hellish din of man conflict that now swelled about the Kennel. And then, through the window, came the brief flicker of a distant lightning flare, a half wink only, but enough to show him Jarvis Karns standing near the hall door, gun extended.

The startling unexpectedness of it caught them both napping. And each was too wise to fire, knowing the other had shifted, knowing the first to fire blindly would die. So each waited, stiffly ready, shutting out the roar of ranger guns as Cap Larribee and Company B drove the Karns men inside, as Dal Slater drove them back from the stairhead.

Now it came. Far away, a bolt hissed downward, it's white flame limning the landscape startlingly. For one clock-tick it filled that office of Jarvis Karns with white light. And two men, one a renegade who led by gunsway, the other a ranger who administered gun law, matched their death-dealing genius. Two guns spat flame. Then black darkness settled down. The fate of those two gunfighters was shrouded in the hiss of rain, in the eave splash, in the merciless battle below, where the hellions of Hell Range fought a losing fight against Pecos Potts, Duane Larribee and the vengeful rangers who remembered the fate of Kim Illo.

WEDGE WOOTEN recovered consciousness on the bed where Dawn had been tied. The room was alight, with the faces of his ranger comrades banked at the two doorways. Beside him lay Senator Ike Koerner, pale, bandaged, pain-filled but smiling. The storm had passed and the first dawnlight filtered into the east window.

"He's comin' alive," announced Pecos, from the bed foot.

"Too tough tuh kill with lead," grinned arm-slung Dal Slater, beside him.

"Pays tuh carry good insurance," chuckled the old sheriff.

"H'are yuh, kid?" boomed Cap Larribee's voice. "How's Paisano?"

"Deader'n a nit!" declared Wedge. "An' Wedge Wooten ain't none too comfortable."

"He wouldn't be . . . . with three broke ribs," grinned the ranger captain. "But he got the Big Devil uh Hell Range plumb center. That oughta cheer him up. You still mean tuh foller that crazy idee uh quittin' the Force?"

"I never meant nothin' more," said Wedge, weakly. "I'm fed up."

"Well, of all the plumb fool. . . ."

A soft hand fell on Wedge's brow. Dawn Koerner's voice snapped. "It's awful to devil a wounded man this way. Get out, all of you!"

"Yo're a lucky cuss," drawled Dal,

brokenly. "I wish she'd look after me thataway."

"Oh-ho!" cooed Cap Larribee. "Is Senator's gal takin' you away from me, feller?"

"If she'll have me," confessed Wedge.

Tenderness filmed her eyes as she looked at him. "I'm proud—now that I know—to have you say that," she blushed, prettily, "proud that you love me. And the same for you, Dal, despite your timidness. But . . . . I'm sorry . . . . not even dad knows I was married last month to the young El Paso doctor who attended dad at the Rocker K. Justice Weems married us and has kept my secret. I'm going to my husband next week. I'm sorry. . . ."

"What a fool I've bin," groaned Wedge, looking at mournful-eyed Dal.

"Right!" chuckled Cap Laribee. "Now pin on yore badge an' forget it."

"I'll pin on my chaps, hunt me some grass an' build me a shack. . . ."

"How many rooms?" taunted the ranger captain, as before.

"One," admitted Wedge disconsolately.

"Two!" corrected Dal. "One fo' his pardneh, which same Ah'm aimin' tuh be."

"An' don't you boys go lookin' fo' grass," put in Senator Koerner. "Ah'm glad to fuhnish that, knowin' that Ah'm swappin' good neighbohs fo' bad . . . . an' a couple willin' boys fo' a hahd-to-manage gal."

And they took him up.

THE END

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Blood on the Hoot-Owl Trail

by Miles Overholt

(Author of "Gallows Stakes," etc.)

Two quarts of red-eye and sheer longrider bravado made Flash Layton and Smoke Anson gamble first their trigger fingers and then their lives to each other. One was twice loser — but his son took up the bet, when the years had all but blotted out the killer sinn.

TWO riders, having completely baffled the posse that had trailed them for twenty miles into the maze of gulches and hardpan, flung themselves from their jaded mounts at Mesa Springs.

"Well, we out-figgered 'em," said Flash Layton, breathing heavily as he unsaddled. "We can lay up here for a day and catch some sleep."

"Man, I'm plumb wore out," said Smoke Anson, wearily. "Whereat is that bottle?"

They each took a long drink and went about building a little fire. They had not

eaten since daylight and it was now nearing nightfall. They took another swig from the quart of whiskey and prepared supper. They ate with gusto. There was no fear of pursuit now. The two fugitives had lost the posse several hours ago. They washed the dishes and rolled cigarettes. The world was all right, and they were not sober by any means.

"Let's count the take," said Flash Layton a little thickly. "How much from the Bank of Wolden, do you guess?"

"Oh, mebbe eight thousand," answered Anson. "Not more'n that. Bad time of year."

Layton took the sack of currency from one of the saddlebags, tossed it to his partner. Anson counted it. Then he grunted, grinned. "I lose," he said. "There's eleven thousand, five hundred. Not bad for a coupla hard-workin' fellers in four days."

Smoke Anson and Flash Layton were partners. They worked together and needed no help. For two years they had specialized in robbing banks. They had been unusually successful, and were, therefore, a bit arrogant, self-confident, proud of themselves. Particularly did they pride themselves upon their iron nerves and, though neither would admit it, they were jealous of each other's prowess and cool-headed judgment. But they were partners and as partners they shared and shared alike.

Both were married. Anson's wife and four-year old daughter lived on a little ranch in Skeleton Valley. Layton had a son, twelve, who had no mother. She had died when the boy was six years of age. Layton's spread was eight or nine miles below that of Anson's. They made two forays a year, safely and profitably. Few ever suspected these two young ranchers of being long-riders. Among their friends they were well-liked and highly respected.

"Hell, I'm tired an' I can't sleep noways," said Layton.

"Maybe we need a drink," Anson said.

"I wouldn't be at all astonished," grinned Flash. So they took another couple of drinks.

Anson poked up the fire. "How 'bout a little freezeout?" he said. "We got plenty dinero."

"Shore. Good idea," said Layton.

Anson produced a pack of well-worn playing cards. Layton spread a saddle blanket. Then they divided the money and started the game.

Layton was lucky from the start. Anson dealt him three kings on his first hand. They were pretty drunk and had plenty of money which had not been spent. Flash bet a thousand dollars. Smoke called him. Each drew two cards. Layton tossed in two five-hundred dollar bills. Anson called. Layton lay down his three kings—Anson had three deuces.

So it went far into the night. Layton continued to win. Anson kept trying to win back his share of the bank loot. They forgot that they were sleepy—put away another quart and by midnight Anson had lost every cent he possessed. Then he bet his guns. He lost. He bet his horse, saddle, his watch. After he had lost the last earthly possession at his disposal, Anson sat and stared into the campfire for a few minutes. Then, rousing himself, he said:

"Deal 'em!"

Layton dealt. "Watcha yuh bettin?" he asked then.

"My trigger finger agin yores," said Smoke Anson.

Layton glanced at his partner. It was a foolish bet—a bet of nerve—and whiskey—not judgment.

"Yuh mebbe know what yuh're doin'," said Layton. "It's a go—trigger finger agin trigger finger."

Anson took two cards. He made a full house. Layton played his four aces.

Smoke tossed in his cards, then laid his trigger finger across the end of a burning log. Layton whipped out his hunting knife and severed it at the first joint! Without a groan, Anson wrapped a bandana about the stump, got up and walked out into the darkness.

It had been a duel of nerve between two tough hombres who, despite their partnership, maintained that keen rivalry. It would have been showing a lack of courage if Layton had backed down—had refused to sever his partner's trigger finger—just as it would have shown a lack of nerve if Anson had welshed on his bet. Foolish pride. . . .

Months went by. The partners rode together again, looted other banks. Anson had to learn to use another trigger finger, but he was ambidextrous. His left hand was as good as his right—and as deadly.

A year later and under similar circumstances the two outlaws were camped in a narrow little valley which they were then using as a hideout. More whiskey was drunk—another poker game was started.

But this time Anson was the lucky one. After Layton had lost everything he owned, Anson, sneering a bit, suggested that the loser still had a first-class trigger finger.

"Deal the cards," said Layton.

He lost on three sevens against three nines.

"Deal 'em for me this time," said Flash then, wrapping up the stump of his trigger finger. "My life agin yores."

Without a change of expression, Anson dealt. Layton lost on four tens. Anson this time held four jacks. Layton stood up. Anson rose, dragged out his gun—fired. Layton crumpled . . .!

HAPPY OLIVER, who knew both men and who had been riding toward their campfire and had halted when he saw Anson chop off the trigger finger of Flash Layton, watched from the darkness the final scene of that tragic drunken poker game. He overheard the bet made and witnessed the shooting. He waited to see no more, but turned and fled back to his horse.

Happy Oliver rode straight to Flash Layton's ranch where, he knew, Davie Layton, the orphan boy, would be waiting for his dad—his dad who had been killed by his partner on a very foolish bet. Oliver liked Davie. He was such a manly little fellow, with the courage of both his father and mother. He had to tell the boy about his father. It would be better if a friend broke the news. . . .

"Yuh got any folks?" Happy asked the boy after they had talked about several inconsequential matters. "I mean besides—uh—yore dad."

"I got an uncle down in New Mexico," replied Davie. "Name's Jim Dixon. He runs the Spade ranch. Why?"

"Uh—yore dad, he met with a kinda accident," said Happy, choking on the words. "He—well, hell—Davie, Smoke Anson killed him last night in a poker game. I thought I'd better tell yuh so's yuh could kinda go to yore folks or somethin'—"

"Smoke Anson—killed—my dad?"

"Yeh. Over a poker game."

The boy's face was as white as chalk, but no tears came to his eyes.

So Davie saddled up that afternoon and rode his little buckskin pony for two weeks before he finally found the Spade ranch. His uncle welcomed him and his aunt mothered him, and soon he was one of the family.

But Davie had a mission. Some day, he had determined, he would kill Smoke Anson. He remembered the man very well; had played with his daughter on the Anson ranch. But Anson had killed his father. He would have to kill Anson. It was in the cards. That was his job if it

took him a lifetime. Grimly he went about learning to handle a six-gun; to read sign, to withstand hardships. But he told his uncle nothing of his plans.

When he was twenty years of age he left the Spade ranch and started his pilgrimage in search of Smoke Anson. He carved his way along until he became known as "The Heller," a tough, fighting waddy with a knack for handling six-guns and without fear in his heart. Finally, he became known as "Heller" Dixon.

He spent four years roaming about the country, working for a while in one section, then another, acquiring experience, making inquiries, growing tougher, harder to handle. Then at last he received definite information about Smoke Anson's headquarters. The place was two counties away. Heller had learned that Anson never left his hideout these days. He was getting pretty old now.

IT was a month later before Heller Dixon invaded Anson's territory. He smelled smoke just at sundown mingling with the delectable odor of frying bacon. He was hungry and he had seen no ranches all day. So he rode down a gurgling stream until he saw a lone pilgrim at a campfire. He headed into the camp. A gray-haired man waved him a welcome.

"Light, Brother, and partake of some sustenance," the old man called.

Heller flashed a grin. "I take it yuh mean come an' put on the feed-bag," he said.

"Come an' get it," smiled the old camper.

Heller turned loose his well-trained horse to graze on the lush grass. There was a rickety spring wagon nearby and a team of ratty ponies grazing along the creek. A well-thumbed bible lay on the seat of the wagon.

"Folks call me Heaven-Hunter," the old man explained. "Now I'll read a couple of verses from the Good Book, then we'll eat."

After the brief, sonorous reading, they fell to. No two ways about it, Heaven-Hunter was a real chef. Besides the crisp bacon, there was a dutch-oven full of grouse, hot dutch-oven biscuits and wild honey, and the coffee was a poem.

"Mister, yuh are certainly the greatest chow-rassler I ever wished would live forever," said Heller Dixon between bites. "If'n yuh can preach as well as yuh can cook, yuh oughta save more souls than a shoe cobbler."

"Thanks," responded the old man. "I believe in doing all things well. I trust you will remain here tonight."

"To get another whack at one of yore meals I'd stay in jail," said Heller.

Around the campfire later, Heaven-Hunter and Heller talked of many things, but not once did the old man ask the young man his name or his business. Then after a brief lull in the conversation, Heaven-Hunter remarked: "About six-seven miles up towards the head of this crick is the headquarters of the outlaw known as Smoke Anson. Ever hear of him?"

Heller's eyes suddenly narrowed and a grim line took the place of his ready grin. The old man saw the strange look come over the younger man's face, but quickly lowered his eyes.

"Yeh—I've heard of him," answered Heller.

"Got a hideout that an army couldn't bust. It's a sort of old crater surrounded by shale."

That was all the conversation about Smoke Anson, but it was enough to disturb the slumbers of Heller Dixon until nearly morning. He was coming close to the end of the trail. Soon he would kill Smoke Anson. Then he would be free to make something of himself. But until that chore had been taken care of, he

must have no mind for anything else.

He vividly recalled the day when Happy Oliver came to tell him of his father's death at the hands of his partner—and of his silent and solemn vow to kill Anson. That vow was just as solemn right now as it had been then when the crime was new. It had not faded with the years—rather, it had become more of an obsession than ever.

In the morning, Heller casually brought up the subject of Anson's daughter. There was a bit more information he desired to glean. So he said: "Seems to me I heard Anson had a daughter somewheres."

"Yes. I was told by some people only yesterday that she had been to school in the East and that she came back West only a few days ago—arriving at San Isabel without notifying her father. Her mother is dead. Someone directed her to Anson's hideout—explaining that it was a ranch." said Heaven-Hunter. "Now that poor child—sixteen or seventeen years of age—is up there alone with those outlaws. Not a pretty picture, my friend."

"No, it ain't," agreed Heller Dixon. Then he saddled up and headed toward San Isabel.

Two or three hours after Heller Dixon rode away from Heaven-Hunter's camp, the old preacher was visited by two men whom he had met on previous occasions, for Heaven-Hunter was well known in the neighborhood.

"Boss wants to see yuh," the leader of the pair told the itinerant gospel vendor. Our cook got kinda deemised coupla days ago an' the ol' man says we gotta get us another'n. We've tried yore chuck an' we know yuh got most chefs beat seven ways from th' jack. So yuh're 'lected."

"But—can't you get someone else?" the old man complained. "Really, I don't see how I can leave my work—"

"Aw, shut up!" barked the leader. "The boss says for us to bring home a cook. They ain't no argument. Get yore hosses."

With a gun at his back, Heaven-Hunter could do nothing else but obey. The two outlaws could not know, of course, that this is what the old pilgrim had been working for, hoping for since he had come into the country nearly two years ago! So, apparently frightened and at the same time hesitant, Heaven-Hunter hitched his ponies to his wagon and headed them toward Smoke Anson's hideout.

HELLER DIXON reached San Isabel early that evening. After supper and a smoke, he strolled down to the Saddle-and-Spur saloon where much revelry was already underway. He bought a drink and asked the bartender to join him. They drank. After three more, a poker game beckoned to Heller, and at the invitation of one of the players, he joined them. They were, it appeared, all cowmen—six of them besides Heller.

There was little change in their respective fortunes for an hour or more. Two of the men—hard-looking customers, they were, too—drank a lot and grew more and more taciturn and snarling with every drink. On Heller's deal, one of the grouches got a pat hand—three kings and a pair of treys. The man at his right drew one card and made four tens. The grouch cursing wildly, threw down his hand and said: "Yuh two hombres must be playin' together. Didn't I see yuh throw away a ten, Tobe?"

"Shore," answered his pal, instantly. "I th'owed away one of them there ten-specks."

"Meanin' which—that I swiped it an' passed it to that gent, or that he took it —? Talk fast, feller!" snapped Heller.

"I figger yuh're pardners—an' that yuh passed him that ten because the discard's in front o' yuh."

"An' I figger yuh're a cockeyed liar!" said Heller.

The grouch's gun flashed. His pal went for his smoke-pole. The man who had the four tens leaped sideways. Heller fired a split second before his accuser pulled trigger. A bullet grazed his thigh. The second gunman was shooting at Heller before Dixon could straighten up. He turned and sent a bullet in the other gunman's direction.

Through the smoke, Heller saw the first man claw at his chest and slither down behind the table. The second gunman had slumped back into his chair. There was a bullet hole just over his heart. Heller hadn't really aimed to kill the second man. But he had drilled him plenty fatal.

Heller's gun now menaced the room. "Any yuh gents figger it wasn't fair? Want to take it up where them salty gents left off?"

Nobody else was having any, thanks. The city marshal came in at the front door, saying no word until he had reached Heller's side.

"Yuh can holster that gun, feller," he said then. "Let's hear about it."

"Two of Curly Wolf Jackson's hellions tried to down this feller an' there they are," said the cowman who had held the four tens. "He let 'em both have a shot before he unlimbered his smoke wagon."

"What yuh got to say, feller?" asked the marshal, eyeing Heller.

"That gent said it all," replied Heller. "One of them fellers accused me of stealin' a card an' slippin' it to that gent. It couldn't be done, of course. But they was on the prod for some reason. The shootin' came off like he done told yuh, except I shot first in the case of the first gent—a mite quicker, was all."

"Yuh ain't under arrest," said the marshal, turning to the dead men.

Heller lingered for a while. He was sipping a drink, when a good-looking, keen-eyed man of about thirty-five stepped to Heller's side and bought a drink. He looked at Heller and smiled.

"Here's to yore good right hand," he said. Heller grinned and drank.

"Yuh want a job—big money—plenty of excitement—lots of danger?" the man asked then in a low tone.

Heller stiffened. He had a sudden hunch that this calm-eyed man was probably a scout for somebody—somebody like Smoke Anson, maybe.

"Might," said Heller. "S'pose we have another drink."

After they downed their second whiskey, Heller said: "Yuh fellers lost some men lately?"

The keen-eyed man shot him a glance. "Yuh're not so dumb," he said. Then: "Yeh, we need two-three recruits."

"Well—I'm not working right now," said Heller.

"Suppose we ride out an' see the big boss," suggested the stranger. "I'll get a coupla quarts for th' boys an' we'll ride."

HELLER grinned and followed the man out. "This wasn't just an accident," the stranger said, as they rode along. "An old feller named Heaven-Hunter saw yuh sometime or other an' liked yore style. He came into camp today an' told Smoke about yuh. Don't know where he got his hunch about yuh. Anyway, he sold Smoke on the idea of sendin' for yuh, an' that's why I braced yuh at the bar."

It was quite a puzzler for Heller. What could Heaven-Hunter know about him? He was sure he never had met the old pilgrim before. And why was he—a preacher—in the camp of an outlaw?

But this was exactly the situation Heller was seeking—to get into Smoke Anson's outlaw camp without exciting suspicion—so that he could kill the outlaw chieftan. But this was too easy.

Things just didn't work out that way.

His mind went back to Heaven-Hunter. Could he be an officer of some sort? No; he was not the type. He seemed to be just what he purported to be—a harmless old religious fanatic—mild and gentle—even if, as Heller had observed, he had lost the trigger finger of his right hand.

It was daylight when they reached the hideout. Their horses had to scramble over six miles of shale, and it was tough going. But once there, it was a Paradise, a pocket containing no less than five hundred acres of green verdure, well watered by crystal springs at the head, with plenty of grass, good cabins, and fine horses.

Smoke Anson was at the corral when they rode up. Some men lounged at the row of cabins among the trees. The scout, who had told Heller that his name was Pete Yates, introduced Heller to Smoke. And after Heller had shaken his firm hand and looked into the clear blue eyes of Smoke Anson, somehow he wished he had not taken an oath to kill the old outlaw.

"Shore glad to have yuh with us," the outlaw leader told Dixon. "Pete, show him a cabin. We'll make habla later." Then he turned and went over to the big cabin, set a hundred yards away from the row of bunkhouses among the trees.

Pete introduced his new friend to the other men, ten in all. Then Pete suggested: "Let's go get somethin' to eat. Me, I'm hongrey."

Heaven-Hunter served them in the cook shack. The old preacher gave no hint that he ever had met the young man before. But Pete reminded him.

Heaven-Hunter grinned wisely. "Shore, I met this young hellion," he admitted then. "Glad to see you, boy. Got some more of them biscuits you like. Hop to it."

They hopped. Then Pete suggested they take a nap. "Won't be anything to do for a coupla days," he said. "But me, I like my sleep."

BUT Heller couldn't sleep. His mind was in too much of a turmoil. Heller's bunk was in one corner of the long bunkhouse. He crawled under the blankets and did his best, but sleep wouldn't come. But because he was completely covered, the three men who came over near to his corner and began talking did not know he was was there.

"She's a showdown, I'm tellin' yuh," Heller heard one of the men say. "Smoke's got close to a hundred thousand bucks cached in his cabin. But, me, I'd pass it up for that gal of his any time."

"But we take both," said another voice, a harsh, high-pitched voice.

"Lessee, Butch Connors won the gal as her fust husbant, didn't he? Then Sam the Sap, then me."

"Yep! Then me," replied the first.

"What about Pete?" asked the second.

"Better not tell him, is my guess. Pete's got ideas. He's too clost to the ol' man," the first speaker said. "But there's ten of us. There may be Pete an' the ol' man to buck, but, hell! what of it! We move in soon's it gets dark. Man, ain't she a beauty?"

And Heller knew he was talking about the girl—Anson's daughter who had come into the bandit camp only two days before—an innocent girl among a pack of wolves.

"Here's the lay," said the first speaker. "Soon's it's dark, we saddle our hawses. Then all ten of us go down to the ol' man's cabin an' stick him up. Soon's we get our hands on the dinero, Sam plugs him. We grab the gal. She's to ride with Butch. He won her for the fust day. If'n Pete interferes, which he won't, we'll just hafta take keer of Pete."

"What about this new gent?"

"Hell! He won't know what it's all about," scoffed the first speaker. "If'n he butts in, we'll butt 'im out. We're all together. Ten of us to take keer of two or mebbe three-four fellers. We split everythin' even—the hundred thousand an' the gal. Let's go see the others an' get 'em set. Pete an' the strange gent's sleepin' somewhar. Now's a good time to make our last plans."

They shuffled out, and Heller, now still more widely awake, got up. Pete had gone to bed in his own little shack at the north end of the bunkhouse.

Heller Dixon didn't know what to do. This was bigger than any other situation he'd ever run into. He didn't know whether to talk to Pete about it or not. He believed old Heaven-Hunter would be against the bandits taking the girl, anyway. And he felt as though he could talk to Smoke Anson. But would he believe him—a stranger against his men all of whom he must know well?

He was about to go down to the cook shack and feel out Heaven-Hunter, when Smoke Anson stepped out of his cabin door and beckoned to him. Heller made his way to the big cabin, and Smoke invited him inside for a drink. Nothing was said for a few minutes, each was sizing the other up. Anson's daughter was nowhere in sight. Smoke Anson's eyes bored into those of Heller Dixon. He was trying to read that young man's character. Then, as if to himself, the old outlaw nodded his head.

"Son," Anson began then, "you don't want to join any wild bunch, do you?"

Heller was startled for a moment. And what was the answer to that question from an outlaw leader in his own camp! "Well, I'm here," he finally said.

"And I'm glad of it," said Anson. "But I don't figger you as a gun-slick. You got too much character. Outlaws, generally speaking, are snakes."

And, even though it surprised himself, Heller replied: "I quite agree with you."

"Pete says they call you 'The Heller' and that you know yore way around. He told me about you downin' them Jackson hellions last night. Good work! But even at that, I figger you are too square to be a bandit. The owlhoot trail is bein' cluttered up with the wrong kinda talent."

"All of which means what?" said Heller.

"I'm gettin' at it, son. And I'm trustin' you with a secret. You're gonna get outa here tonight. But you're takin' somethin' of mine with you—somethin' very precious—my daughter."

Heller's eyes widened.

"That's why I sent for yuh," went on the old outlaw. "I discovered an hour after Lola had arrived here that we was in for some trouble. Most of my men—mebbe all of 'em—are made up of scum. They already got their eyes on my girl. They aim to get her one of these days and I got to get her away before they get outa hand."

"You're too late, Mr. Anson," said Heller, quietly. "They start their dirty work tonight."

"What? How did you hear that?"

"Three mugs came into the bunkhouse where I was supposed to be sleepin' and talked over their plans. I heard the whole plot. The fireworks open as soon as it gets dark," Heller explained.

The old man sat silently digesting the information for a minute. Then: "Then I'll have to do the best I can—alone," he said. "I can't ask you to throw in with me. Pete might, I dunno. Old Heaven-Hunter will be with me. But—well, it's the best I can do now."

"No secret way to get out, I reckon?" Heller made it a question.

"No—No chance to sneak her out in daylight at all. If they had held off one more day—oh, well, they didn't. It boils

down to three-four of us doin' the best we can."

"Count me in," said Heller, quietly.

"I already had," smiled Smoke Anson. "You see, I am quite a reader of character. I figger you're worth at least four of them toads out thar."

"May I suggest something?" asked Heller.

"Shore—go ahead."

"Order supper a little bit early, if you can. Then you get Heaven-Hunter down here—or wherever we can put up the best defense. I'll go have a talk with Pete—and do some other chores. It's now four o'clock. I imagine it gets dark in this basin around seven. Right?"

"Just about."

"Soon as supper's over, they are going to get their horses ready, and will be all set to attack you by seven. We've got to be ready. But I have a plan that may cut down the odds." Heller got up.

There was a rustling of curtains at the middle doorway and a vision burst into view. Heller Dixon almost gasped. Never in his twenty-five years of life had he seen such a beautiful creature as was Lola Anson.

"I heard, Daddy," she said, quietly.

"I was afraid you would," said Anson, frowning. "Well, now you know. I didn't want you to learn, but that's the way things go." He sighed. "But there is no time to go into regrets or anything else. We've got a job to do."

He introduced the girl to Heller. She placed a slim hand in his, and smiled. Heller began looking around for dragons to slay.

"Get back here soon's supper's over," said Anson. "And if'n you can get Pete's ear and have him come see me, I'll put it up to him. He might stick. See you soon, son."

The girl smiled a goodbye, and, dazedly, Heller Dixon went out into the afternoon sunlight.

PETE was still sleeping. At least, he was not in sight, so Heller went back to the bunkhouse and sat down on his bunk to ponder. The ten outlaws were together in the adjoining cabin where they were playing cards and drinking the last of the whiskey Pete had brought out to them. Heller grinned. All that liquor would help.

Pete came into the bunkhouse.

"Smoke wants to see you," Heller said. "But, first, I wanta ask you one or two items."

"Shoot," said Pete.

"You don't belong here, Pete," said Heller, then. "You're too much of a real man, know 'at?"

"Where did you ever get that kinda idea?" wondered Pete.

"Just one of my own," said Heller. "Look—you know what them gents down there are plannin'? To kill the old man, and take his cache and the girl. They've already played cards to see who has the girl first. Then they're gonna kill Smoke and you, if'n you interfere, and beat it outa the country."

"You dreamin' or something?"

"I overheard three of them buzzards talkin' in the bunkhouse awhile ago," answered Heller. "Then I went over to see the old man. He knows it, too."

"Yeh? And what'm I supposed to do about it?" growled Pete.

"Up to you, of course," Heller said. "Me—I'm stringin' along with the old man."

Pete grinned. "I'll go see Smoke," he said, going out.

Three of the bandits quit the card game and went out to haze in the horses. Heller went over to the big corral where the men were catching their mounts. "I'll go help,"

he said. No one answered him. He saddled his own horse.

They rode toward the upper end of the basin. Heller could see a herd of horses among the trees. The four arrived together at the gate that led into the pasture. "I'll open it," said Heller, dismounting. But he didn't open the gate. Instead, he turned, bringing a gun into sight.

"Stick 'em high!" he ordered.

"A deputy!" snarled one of the men, going for his gun.

Heller's shot was almost the tick of a second ahead of the gunman's. But he had to keep it up. Two others were firing at him. A bullet nicked his neck. That one was close. The three gunmen were down. One was still firing but Heller quieted him.

He dragged the bodies over away from the gate so the horses would come through. The mounts had to be driven into the corral or the others would come looking for their pals. If Heller corralled the broncs, they would think the other three were around somewhere.

Seven to go. . . .

IT was all very quiet around the cabins. Evidently, no one had heard the shots. The wind was in Heller's favor.

When the gong rang for supper Pete sat at Heller's side.

"Where are the other boys?" asked Heaven-Hunter.

"Went to drive in some hawses," replied one of the men. "Some of us is goin' out for a little pasear. They'll be along soon."

Pete got up and sauntered over to his shack. The sun dipped behind the mountains. Long shadows caressed the basin. From the bunkhouse Heller saw Pete Yates saunter down toward the big cabin. Pete was playing a man's game.

In a moment Heaven-Hunter came out of the cook shack and meandered down to the big cabin. It was dusk. He could hear the men in the other cabin. None was laughing now. Things were growing tense. Seven men came out and started for the corral. Heller heard one say: "It's O. K. The boys have brought in the hawses. Let's go saddle up." They were all pretty drunk. Heller went down to the big house where he found Pete and Heaven-Hunter talking about cattle. Smoke Anson was not in sight. Neither was the girl. Heaven-Hunter got up and closed the door. A bullet pinged into the wall. It had come through a window. Pete doused the light.

Came a voice out of the darkness: "Hey, Smoke. Come out. We wanta talk to yuh!"

"What about?" the old outlaw called from another room. "Yuh had all day to talk. Why this sudden desire for conversation?"

"We're takin' yuh, Smoke—takin' yore cache an' the gal. An' we're chousin' anybody that gets in our way. They's ten of us; mebbe two of you. Send out the gal an' the cache an' we'll ride, leavin' yuh unharmed. If'n yuh don't, we're burnin' yuh down an' takin' the gal an' the dinero, anyhow."

"You're takin' nothin' and nobody," called Heller. "Besides, three of your pals are piled up at the pasture gate. I left 'em there. Also you are up against four of us, and there are seven of you. We're inside. Why don't you start burnin' us down!"

The taunt started things. Seven guns began boring bullets into the cabin. Each man took a window and answered the flashes. For a few minutes so many were shooting, and so intense was the battle that Heller forgot what it was all about. Only vaguely did he hear a man screaming outside. Then a groan came to his ears. That was from someone nearby. But he was to busy to investigate. A

dark object passed under his window. Heller leaned out and fired. The object wilted. A flash nearby—Heller shot at it. The firing from that quarter ceased.

Heller guessed that three of the attackers were down. Only four flashes could be seen. Smoke Anson yelped. "Got 'im!" There was no one firing from one of the windows which had bene occupied at the beginning. That would be the man who groaned. Heaven-Hunter laughed. "Plugged that one neat."

The shooting halted. The silence was appalling. Then came a clatter of hoofs.

"'Sall over," said Smoke Anson. "The last of 'em high-tailed it."

They waited awhile, then Heaven-Hunter lighted the big lamp. Pete Yates was silent. Heller bent over him. A bullet had got him in the chest. He was stiffening. Heaven-Hunter was unscathed. Smoke Anson had a groove in his left arm which bled a bit. A bullet had nicked Heller's ear.

Smoke lighted a lantern and went out. Heller joined him. They found five dead men.

"You mean to say yuh went out an' sloughed three of 'em so's to cut down the odds?" Smoke was looking at the young man.

"Yeh—at the pasture gate. It's easier to handle seven than ten," Heller said.

"Let's go rassle a drink," said Smoke.

Heller didn't know what to do now. He had come up there to kill the man who had murdered his father, Smoke Anson, and he hated to do it. But that was his job, so . . . .

THEY went into the house. After they had sipped at their drinks for a minute or two, Heaven-Hunter turned to Heller Dixon with one of his peculiar grins.

"Gonna tell yuh a bedtime story," said the preacher-man. "Once upon a time they was a coupla fellers who thought they were pretty dang tough and plenty nervy. They played poker and the dang fools bet their trigger fingers, both finally losin' one apiece. Then, just to show he was tougher'n his pal, one of 'em wagered his life an' lost. The first feller, fearin' he would be called a welsher if'n he didn't shoot his pard, hauled his gun an' plugged the loser in the shoulder.

"He didn't mean to kill him, y'see, and he didn't. The feller who had done the shootin' took his pal to a cave an' bound up the wound. Then he stepped out of the cave and into the arms of a sheriff and his posse. The sheriff took the feller to town and saw he got ten years. Now this jailbird was worried plumb sick, because he had a wife and little gal livin' on a ranch he owned, but he was afraid to tell the sheriff about 'em. He didn't want 'em hounded by the law, y'see.

"Well, he worried plenty, but couldn't do anything. But he needn't have to. Because the wounded pardner managed to get himself up and around in a coupla weeks, tough as it was, and went and looked for his own kid—a boy—livin' alone on his dad's ranch. But the kid had disappeared. So, broken-hearted, this feller went and got the wife and daughter of his jailed pardner and took keer of them till the woman died, a coupla years later.

"Then, so's there wouldn't be too many questions asked, the feller took what money he had and sent the gal to a school in the East. Also he took the name of his pardner who was in the Big House. That was so he could take care of the gal, y'see."

Heaven-Hunter took a long drink. Heller, too, felt the need of one. Smoke Anson puffed at his pipe, saying nothing. The preacher resumed: "The feller in jail wasn't a model prisoner. He tried to bust out two-three times, so he had to

serve the full ten years. He got out four-five years ago. But he had kinda lost his nerve. He had no family; no way to make a livin'; nary a friend anywheres—unless the man he had shot was alive.

"It took him three years to get a wagon and team together. Then, assuming the role of a travelin' preacher, he went about the country lookin' for his old pardner. Y'see, he didn't know whether he would be shot on sight, if he did find him, or what. And the pardner—after the jailbird had located him—stayed holed up. And the jailbird, of course, couldn't get in to see him. But he hung around for a coupla years and got acquainted with some of the members of his band, and, finally, got a chance to move in.

"Meantime, though, he met a young feller whom he thought he recognized, in spite of the fact that he wasn't wearin' the name he used to carry. But he figgered he would have use for that young feller, so he kinda framed him to get him into the camp with him, having some ideas of his own about rescuin' his daughter from his pardner—if the pardner wasn't right. But when he reached his pardner's side and found what he had done to protect and look after his daughter and all, why, he changed his mind—only then the pardner found he needed some help to protect this same gal—who wasn't his daughter—and I reckon mebbe you get the general story."

Heller was looking wide-eyed, first at Smoke Anson, then at Heaven-Hunter. Then, gulping, he blurted out: "Which one of you then is my dad?"

"I am, son," said Smoke Anson.

But he waited for Heller to make the first move. Heller was glad to make it. He leaped across the room and took the old outlaw's hand.

Heaven-Hunter was smiling. "And I'm Smoke Anson, the First," he said. "Your dad is, of course, Flash Layton. I knowed you for two reasons," he went on. "First, your face is Flash Layton's face, unshaved. Then I had already checked up on you and knew all about you before you showed up. I knew you were looking for the man who you thought killed your dad. And that was another reason why I schemed to get you here. I wanted you to meet your dad under the right conditions."

"And so Lola is your daughter, and—and—Dad is alive and O.K. Gee! I'm glad I didn't have to kill him." Heller sank into a chair.

Lola Anson then came into the room. "I overheard all that, too," she said. She smiled at Heaven-Hunter and went over and kissed him.

"I've known for two days that you were my real daddy," she said. "Daddy—Mr. Anson—told me. Only I can't call him 'Mr. Anson.' He's Daddy, too."

"That suits me just fine," said Smoke Anson—the real Flash Layton.

Heller Dixon chuckled. "I've got a grand scheme," he said. "I got me a plan to get rid of all these complications."

Lola Anson came over and smiled into his face. "I hope it solves my problem about whom to call Daddy," she said, a woman having suspicions.

"Shucks, you already guessed," said Heller, blushing furiously. "I was gonna say that if we—you and I—could kinda get together and talk it over, mebbe—well, heck!—there are two dads and two of us—and if'n it could be arranged so's you could call 'em both 'daddy,' legally—" He stopped there—it was as far as he could go.

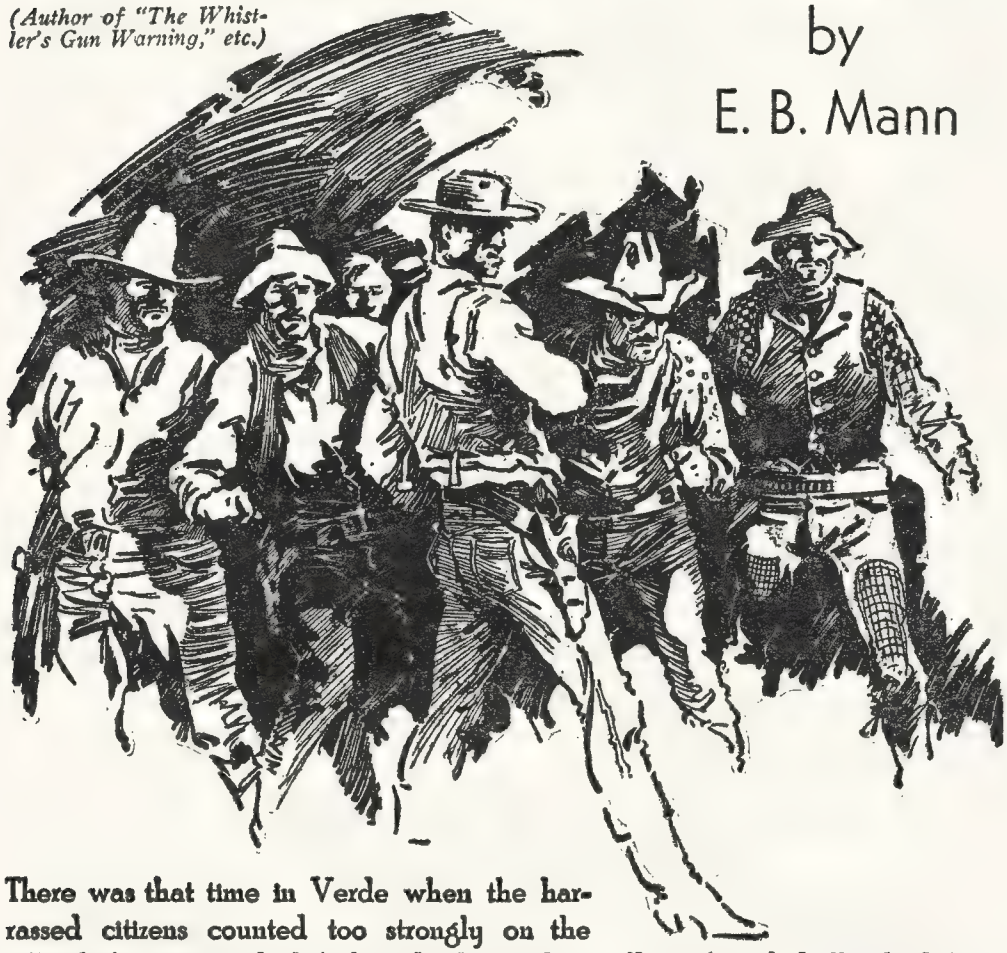
The girl looked squarely at him, then lowered her eyes. "Well," she said then, "I do think, now that the families are together after all these years, that they should not be separated."

And then it was her turn to blush.

THE WHISTLER'S

(Author of "The Whistler's Gun Warning," etc.)

by E. B. Mann



There was that time in Verde when the harrassed citizens counted too strongly on the Whistler's guns and left him, back to the wall, to furnish bullet-bail for a dead man's friend—with his only bond the tempered steel of a fighting heart.

A STRANGE foreboding silence lay upon the little town of Verde; a sort of Sabbath hush that seemed the more unusual since this was Saturday, cow-country's day in town. A score of saddle horses lined the hitching rails along the town's main street but there were no pedestrians, no little groups engaged in talk.

A single rider turned into the northern end of that main street, the quick clip-clop of his horse's hoofs ringing sharp and loud between the silent stores. The man was whistling softly as he rode but the sound broke off as he sensed the tension in the air. He changed the bridle reins to his left hand and let his right hand drop to rest beside a holstered gun. The tall trail-dusty buckskin under him flicked one ear back and changed his gait into a shorter, springier stride.

From the corners of his eyes the rider glimpsed men's faces in the windows facing him on both sides. He frowned and

GUN CALL

Novelette of Cowtown Law.

swung to the right through wide inviting doors of the Verde Livery Barn. The town felt like a bomb just waiting to explode. The stranger was puzzled.

A pinto gelding lifted his dainty muzzle from the feed box in a stall to the left of the doors as the buckskin halted there and a man came out from behind the horse. "Howdy, stranger," he said. "Step down and let your saddle rest."

The voice was frank and friendly, like the grin that went with it. And the speaker was a handsome youngster, tall and slim and somehow gallant, with his hat pushed back above his eyes. His right hand slid carelessly along the pinto's rump until his fingers combed the silken tail. The rider on the buckskin smiled.

"That's quite a horse," he said judiciously, certain of this common ground between them.

"You ain't exactly afoot yourself. I'd hate to have to run that buckskin down."

The rider dismounted. "He's fast enough. But most folks don't see that. They figure since he ain't a handsome horse he's just a skate. You've got a horseman's eye."

He let the buckskin go into an empty stall before he added soberly, "What's got this town on edge?"

"I didn't know it was," the boy began, and paused.

Quick footsteps rang upon the planking of the walk outside and both men turned. A girl stood there, breathing hard, her tumbled hair encircling a troubled oval face. Her eyes sought out the younger man.

"Oh, Gil, why did you come?"

"Why, Sue, it's Saturday, ain't it? I always come to town on Saturday. Besides, I had a date with you."

"You didn't get my message, then! You didn't know!"

They were intent upon each other now, forgetful of the other man. He turned and stepped into the buckskin's stall, uncomfortable in this unwilling role of listener. But still the girl's half-whispered words were audible.

"Dutch Sudermann's in town!"

He caught his breath, standing rigid in the shadowed stall. He heard the boy's half-spoken oath. The girl's tense voice went on.

"He got here late last night. I didn't know until today, but I sent word to you. He's making threats. You mustn't meet him, Gil. He'll kill you—"

"Maybe not. I might kill him!"

"Gil!"

The girl cried out as if his words had been a blow. But she went on again, pleadingly. "What if you did? Dan Patrick's Sheriff now—are you forgetting that? He hates you, Gil—and Sudermann's his friend. Dan's only waiting for a chance to strike at you. You know that, Gil. Even if you—even if it was in self-defense, they'd make it bad for you."

The boy's face changed subtly as she talked. His jaw set stubbornly and his eyes took on a hard cold veil. His voice was hard, too, when he spoke.

"I sure ain't goin' to run!" he said.

A SHADOW fell across the alleyway between the stalls unnoticed by the boy and girl. But the man half-hidden in the buckskin's stall turned instantly to face the barn's back door. A man stood there, an ape-like figure, feet widespread, the shoulders hunched so that the arms seemed long and pendulous. The sunlight streaming through the door outlined the figure in sharp silhouette so that the face was featureless; and yet the watcher knew that this was Sudermann.

"Behind you, Gil!"

The stranger's voice, controlled and low, still carried urgency. Gil stiffened, thrust the girl aside, and turned. His face was white but as he turned his body moved with cat-like grace, and muscles loose, untensed.

Dutch Sudermann came forward then, his heavy body lurching in to cut the distance down. "I got yuh, kid. I got yuh dead to rights! Here's where yuh die!"

His voice was hoarse, gloating. "I spent eight years in jail on yore account, yuh whelp! I killed yore dad, just like yuh thought I did; but I'd've got off clean except for you . . . Eight years, just lookin' forward to this!"

He halted opposite the buckskin's stall, and laughed. Beyond his burly hulk the man concealed among the shadows could see the boy, both men like actors in the center of a stage, alert and poised. The boy's low answering voice was strained but firm.

"I'm ready, Sudermann. Knowin' for sure that you killed dad will—help."

In the stall six feet from Sudermann, the stranger's fingers crooked around the butts of holstered guns. "The kid's got nerve," he thought approvingly. "But Sudermann's too fast for him. There's no use lettin' this go on."

He said aloud: "You move a finger, Sudermann, and I'll put a bullet into you! Put up—"

He had expected Sudermann to turn. Instead, it was as if his voice had been the signal that touched off the fuse. He heard Sudermann's explosive snarl; saw the boy's right hand sweep up. His own guns cleared their sheaths and flipped to aim, the hammers back beneath his thumbs.

His draw had been the fastest of the three—so fast that there was time for him to see and judge the speed of both the other men. He did not fire. He saw the youngster's gun spit flame, waist high, while Sudermann's right hand was still in play. Dutch Sudermann had made a fast cross-handed draw, but it was ruined by the smash of striking lead. His shot struck dirt a yard in front of him. He staggered back.

Behind the two-toned thunder of the guns the girl's keen voice rang out with vivid clarity. She darted forward, clutching at Gil's arm. Dutch Sudermann was walking backward on his heels, step by step, his face distorted as his fingers clawed across his chest. He tripped and fell. And not till then did Gil relax and catch the girl tight in his arms.

The stranger sheathed his guns and stepped out into the alleyway. Pale eyes stared up at him as he bent down beside the fallen man. His voice was very low.

"You know me, Sudermann? I'm Jim Sinclair. Where's Brick Kerhute?"

The answer came laboriously. "He got me! That damn kid—!" His pale eyes focused then. "You, eh? Sinclair! Damn you, I thought I'd shook yuh off my trail. I knew that yuh was follerin' me—at first. I laid awake nights, thinkin' I could hear yuh—whistlin'! Last night I slept. I thought—"

"You're dyin', Dutch. Why don't you tell me where to find Kerhute?" The stranger's voice, still low, cut in insistently.

Dutch Sudermann's thick lips writhed back into an ugly leer. "Kerhute—ain't far from here," he gasped. "I hope yuh find him, damn yore soul! He'll—shoot—the livin' guts right out of yuh!"

The whisper ceased and Sudermann stared up, beyond Sinclair with eyes that seemed to glaze. He stiffened then convulsively, death rattling in his throat.

Sinclair stood up. The girl's soft sobbing filled the deathly hush. Above her head the boy's inquiring eyes searched Sinclair's face.

"He's dead," Jim said. "You've done a right good job."

"You tried to stop it, though," Gill said accusingly.

"Why, yes. I wasn't sure that you could handle him. I thought that when I spoke he'd see that he was in a hole. It didn't work."

The boy's lips twisted in a crooked grin. "He never knew that you was there," he said. "He was stone deaf in his left ear. My daddy laid a gun across his head one time and deafened him. He couldn't tell the direction of a sound, you see? My face was shadowed by the light behind me so he couldn't see if my lips moved or not; and what *you* said *I* might've said. . . . . He thought that I was darin' him to draw!"

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Friends

THE tense electric silence that had warned Sinclair as he entered Verde a while ago was broken now by voices rocketing from wall to wall and by the thud of running feet. A dozen men burst through the square of sunlight where the barn doors opened to the street, and Sinclair stepped aside a pace or two until, again, he was half hidden by the shoulder-high partition of a stall.

The new arrivals halted just inside the

doors and stood there blinking as they faced the semi-dark. The leader was a tall, lean-featured man whose voice cut through the noises of the gathering crowd.

"Gil Peters, eh? Just as I thought! What's happened here?"

A shaft of light struck slantingly upon a star pinned to the speaker's vest and Sinclair's mind flashed back to pick a name out of his memory of the girl's tense argument with Gil. "Dan Patrick's sheriff now," the girl had said. "He hates you, Gil—and Sudermann's his friend." But there was a light of triumph in the sheriff's eyes as he surveyed this scene. Not grief nor anger at the violent passing of a friend, but triumph. Sinclair wondered why.

Gil Peters turned as Patrick spoke, stepping clear of the girl's detaining arms. His voice was low yet somehow challenging. But what he said meant nothing to Sinclair.

"Better late than never, Dan. You been in town all day?"

The question puzzled Patrick, too. "All day. But what's that got to do with this?"

Gil shrugged. "Dutch Sudermann hit town last night. Since then he's told the world what he was here to do. I didn't know that till it was too late. But you must've known it, Dan—the whole town did. That's why the street emptied after I rode in. You could've put a stop to it."

There was a pause while men turned thoughtfully to study Patrick's face. The boy had scored. But Patrick's laughter had an ugly sound. "I ain't your guardian, Gill. And anyway Dutch didn't mean those threats. Why, that was just a lot of likker-talk."

"Judgin' by what Dutch did," Gil said, "Looks like the likker told the truth."

"What did he do? Let's hear your story, Gil. You better make it good!"

The Sheriff's tone was trucculent. Gil Peters was bewildered, Sinclair knew, but his answer came deliberately.

"Dutch must've seen me ridin' in. He saw me turn in here and so he slipped around behind the barn. He came in through the alley door and—laid it on the line. He said he'd spent eight years in jail on my account. He said he aimed to kill me like he killed my dad. . . . I beat him to the draw, that's all."

Again Dan Patrick laughed. "So that's the way you're tellin' it!" he said. "A likely tale, by George! A kid like you, not dry behind the ears, claimin' you beat Sudermann! It don't go down, that's all! With me, it don't! Why, Dutch could—"

"But, Dan, it's true!"

The girl's clear voice cut through and Patrick paused. The following silence was intense. Then Patrick spoke again, more softly now but with a slurring emphasis.

"Well, now! Sue Sutherland. . . . You was real smart to have a witness handy, Gil. I see you picked one you could bank on, too!"

He made a quick derisive movement with his hand and now his voice cracked out with sudden force. "It's pretty plain what happened, Gil. You rode in here—Sue followed you. She filled you up with some wild tale how Sudermann was huntin' you. Then Dutch just happens to step in. He'd be sun-blinded for a minute, same as we was when we came in just now. . . . And you cut down on him before he knowed that you was here!"

THERE was a momentary hush, broken only by the girl's quick gasping breath. Then Sinclair stepped out from the stall. Patrick wheeled to face him and a little ripple of surprise ran through

the crowd, like wind among dry leaves. But Sinclair's tone was casual.

"Now that's a real smart theory, sure," he said. "It's only got one fault—it's wrong! I saw this thing. The kid told you the truth."

He heard the girl's quick cry of gratitude; saw Gil's tense frame relax. But Patrick's face was twisted with a sudden rage.

"Now who the hell are you?" he barked.

It was a question Jim had known must come and he was set for it. He answered with a lie. "The name is Smith," he said. "Jim Smith," he added, mixing truth with fiction as an afterthought.

Patrick snorted. "Sure it ain't John Doe, or Richard Roe?"

"Them names might do; but so will Smith. You hinted just a while ago that the young lady there was prejudiced. It's different here. I never saw the kid before. All I know is that he told the truth."

Dan Patrick glared but Sinclair's gaze was blank, expressionless. Patrick scowled and squared simself, endeavoring to regain the arrogance that Sinclair's entrance had jarred out of him.

"That bein' true," he said, "you'd better stick around and testify." He reached out suddenly and jerked Gil's gun. There'll be an inquest Monday noon. You, Gil, walk out ahead of me. You folks keep clear of Sudermann. I'll send the coroner to look at him. I'm holdin' Gil until the inquest's done."

The crowd surged in as Patrick and his prisoner passed out to the street and Sinclair thrust against the tide to shield the girl. She glanced up at him as the crowd shut off her view of Gil.

"You tried to help," she said. "You even tried to take the fight yourself. I'm grateful; so is Gil. . . . What will they do to him?"

"They can't do anything. That's just what puzzles me." He hesitated for a moment as if in thought. Then: "Suppose you come with me where we can talk." They stepped outside. Ahead, Jim caught a glimpse of Patrick and his prisoner just turning in toward a building with barred windows facing the street. "Some parts of this I know," he said, "for instance: Dutch Sudermann went to jail for killin', or for helpin' to kill, a sheriff here in Verde. As I remember it, Dutch had an alibi. But the prosecutor broke that down on the strength of the testimony of this sheriff's son."

"That's right," the girl agreed. "Gil was that boy."

"That's what I gathered from the talk. But, Miss, that Sheriff's name was Dave Conroy."

She nodded. "Yes . . . Oh, now I see what's bothering you. But Gil was Sheriff Dave's adopted son. Gil's mother died when he was born. She was alone; a stranger here. But she had registered in the hotel as Mrs. Gilbert Peters—so the Conroy's gave that name to Gil."

"And that's one mystery solved," Jim said. "Well, here's another one. Why was Dan Patrick so dead set on draggin' Gil to jail?"

This time Sue flushed. "Dan's always hated Gil. It's my fault, in a way. You see—well, Gil and I are—we're engaged. And Dan—"

"I see," Jim said. "I'm sort of jealous of the kid myself! But still—"

"There's more to it than that, of course. Gil owns a valley back among the hills that Patrick needs for summer range. And Gil won't sell. . . . It's beautiful up there." The girl's soft voice took on a dreamy tone and Sinclair glanced at her. Her face was wrapt and beautiful. "We want to make our home there, Gil and I. Dan's tried to force Gil out. Per-

haps he thinks if he can send Gil off to jail. . . ."

"But, shucks, he can't do that! What's more, he knows he can't. Not with you and me to testify. And anyway no jury'd send a man away for killin' Sudermann! So why . . ?" He broke the sentence there and left his thought unsaid. There was nothing to gain by worrying her more than she was worried now.

THEY passed the jail and Sinclair fell to whistling. The sound was faint at first; thin wisps of melody without a central theme. But it gained volume gradually and found a haunting rhythm of its own. The sound was thin and high, illusive, shrill as bagpipe music dimly heard, then breaking oddly into bird-like melodies. And it was sad—the saddest music Sue had ever heard.

The girl glanced up at him. He had forgotten her—she knew—was lost in thought in which she had no part. She said: "So all Dan has to gain by this is just two days; until the inquest Monday noon. What can he do in that short time?"

The whistling ceased and Sinclair met her eyes. "That's what's been puzzlin' me," he said. And then, "Is Gil's range stocked?"

Sue shook her head. "He's saving money by not hiring men. His stock is running in with dad's on shares. There can't be more than fifty head up there, all wild as deer and scattered over forty miles of rough, heart-breaking land."

"So Patrick couldn't break the kid by any raid," Jim said. He frowned and added, aimlessly, "You ever heard of Brick Kerhute?"

"Of course—who in the Southwest hasn't heard of him? Dutch Sudermann was boasting, so I heard, that he was joining Kerhute's gang." She halted suddenly, her blue eyes wide with fear. "Do you suppose Kerhute would seek revenge on Gil for killing Sudermann?"

Jim shook his head. "Dutch Sudermann meant nothin' to Kerhute," he said. "I know that for a fact. They'd never met."

But back of that his thoughts were running deep and turbulent. She could be right—or partly right. Dan Patrick obviously hated the kid, but putting Gil in jail for just two days was petty stuff. Yet Patrick risked his job, going straight against the public sentiment, for that! It didn't make sense.

Sue's voice cut through his revery. It startled Jim to hear her voice his own unspoken thoughts. This girl was smart! "Dan Patrick's an ambitious man," she said. "He risked a lot of votes today by holding Gil without a cause. That worries me. I think I'll get my dad to bring the boys to town. I think it might be just as well if Gil had friends in Verde from now till Monday noon!"

"You may be right," Jim said. "How many riders has your daddy got?"

"Some thirty-odd. Enough?"

Jim grinned. "Why, yes; I'd say that was enough, all right. . . . Sue Sutherland. Jock Sutherland, of the Bar 9! Of course! I should've recognized your name."

"You know my dad?"

"I know enough about Jock Sutherland to understand his havin' a big crew!" Jim sobered then. "You do that thing. You bring your dad and all the riders he can spare. Just let 'em circulate and sort of watch the jail. . . . But don't you worry, now. We're likely seein' things that don't exist; and if we ain't, we'll be prepared for them. Gil's goin' to be all right."

But it was twenty miles to Sutherland's Bar 9 and twenty back to Verde. Those miles took time.

CHAPTER THREE

Lynching Party

IT was black dark in the livery barn in which Dutch Sudermann had died. Jim Sinclair jerked the buckskin's saddle girths to proper tightness and then moved carefully across the alleyway into the stall in which Gil Peters' pinto stood. The horse reached back to nuzzle him and Sinclair ran his hand along the silken neck. "It's all right, old horse," he murmured. "Just a fool idea of mine."

The pinto's saddle was still in place and Sinclair pulled the cinches tight. It seemed to him that he and Gil might need those mounts tonight, although he had no facts with which to back that hunch. But if they did the need would be a hurried one.

He walked back then to the rear door of the barn and stepped out into the deserted alley. The back door of a saloon spilled a yellow bar of light across his path and Sinclair frowned at it but passed unseen.

A store, unlighted, stood next in line and beyond that a vacant lot. Sinclair turned left toward the street, keeping in the blacker shadow near the store. Midway, he stopped and sat down on a packing box. A dozen yards away light gleamed in orange, perpendicular stripes through the two barred windows of the jail.

A deputy named Tucker was on guard. Jim knew that because he had visited the jail just after dark. "Just," he had carefully explained, "to make sure Gil had cigarettes and things." The deputy had eyed him with a surly, speculative manner, and had remained nearby while Gil and Jim spoke a few words. He looked like a mean customer to Sinclair, but just now Jim had other things on his mind. He had the lay of the jail—he wondered what would come next.

Dutch Sudermann meant nothing to Kerhute—that was sure. But Brick Kerhute had been blamed before for things he didn't do. A jail-break, now, blamed on Kerhute, would be a handy thing from Patrick's point of view. Yes, that was probably the answer.

But Kerhute wouldn't be likely to take it lying down. He seemingly was a man of real ability—a man with brains, with courage and the gift of leadership—a man capable of drawing together an outlaw band and wielding it as a fencer wields a slender blade, deftly and with swift sure strokes.

Fearless, clever as an old wolf, this man had lashed the whole Southwest to fury with his crimes. And yet he was a mystery—a tall, lean man with blonde mustache and light blue eyes beneath a thatch of brick-red hair—a man who spoke like a gentleman, who struck and flashed a white-toothed smile and rode away to vanish like a ghost.

And Suderman had meant to join Kerhute. A stool-pigeon in the penitentiary had learned that much by listening in on Sudermann's talk with one of Kerhute's unlucky henchmen there. That fact had hastened Sudermann's release. "We'll turn him loose and let him lead us to Kerhute." That had been the plan and it had worked, up to a point. But Sudermann had killed a payroll messenger just ten days following his release. He was again a wanted man. That fact alone might well have justified his death. That, plus two witnesses to prove an even break, and still Dan Patrick had thrown the kid in jail! There must be a reason back of it all.

A COMPACT group of horsemen came along the alley at a walk and Jim Sinclair leaned forward, watching

them. Three broke away beyond the jail and shadows swallowed them. The rest came on until they reached the strip of darkness that concealed Sinclair. Then they, too, halted and Jim heard the creak of saddle-leather as they dismounted. He stood up carefully and hitched the holsters forward on his hips. This might be trouble, or it might be Sutherland. The numbers made him choose the latter guess.

A man came toward him, close against the wall, a half-seen blur of blacker shadow in the gloom. Jim whispered, "That you, Sutherland? It's me—Jim Smith."

"Jim Smith?"

The husky whisper barely reached Jim's ears.

"Sure. Sue must've told you about me. I sent her after you."

Again that pause. There was a tension here that Jim could not quite understand. He probed the darkness with his eyes; could just make out the bulk of shoulders and a head. The man was oddly motionless.

"Okay, Jim Smith." Somehow Jim guessed the man was smiling now. "You figure somethin's goin' to happen here?"

"I figured somethin' might. I'm likely wrong. But it looked queer to me, Patrick bein' so intent on gettin' Gil in jail. Most times, with witnesses to swear to self-defense, and with the dead man bein' Sudermann, a sheriff wouldn't be so damn particular! And with Kerhute not far away—Well, dirty work's been done before and blamed on Brick Kerhute."

A chuckle came to him out of the dark. "You're right! You sound to me like a deep-thinkin' man. . . . So what did you aim to do?"

"Just be on hand in case somebody made a break. Gil's horse is saddled—so is mine. Both in the livery barn. . . . The joke's on me if nothin' breaks. Still, bein' careful don't cost much and bein' careless sometimes does."

"You're right. . . . What color is your horse?"

"A buckskin, across from Gil's pinto."

"Good! You wait here. I'll be right back."

The shadow faded, sliding back along the wall. A moment later it came back. "I sent a man to fetch your horse, and Gil's. You see it happens that I know your hunch is right. Dan Patrick aims to lynch the kid—Look there!"

Six horses, one of them riderless, moved down the street and halted in a compact mass before the jail. Four men swung down and crossed the sidewalk at a run.

Sinclair said: "This is it!" and would have lunged out into the light. The man beside him caught his arm. "Wait!" Just that single whispered word, yet in it was the utter confidence that comes from long command. It halted Sinclair in his tracks.

ONE man, still mounted in the street, sat motionless, his face toward the jail. Behind him, Sinclair saw a figure cross the street and pause, the right arm shooting forward in a looping toss. The rider's hands shot up, clawed at his throat. Jim saw the thin black line of rope that dragged him down. The thing was soundless and precise.

"Now let's go!"

The man beside Sinclair lunged out, his lean stooped figure charging forward with astounding speed. Jim lunged after him. To right and left he caught swift glimpses of still other figures closing in. It looked as though the Bar 9 had come in force!

The man ahead went through the door and Sinclair followed him, both guns bared now and poised. The scene inside

was like a stage on which the actors had been turned to stone.

Gil Peters stood just opposite the door, wide-eyed, his mouth agape. Behind him in the corridor between the cells, two masked men held guns pressed against his back. Against the wall at Sinclair's left the deputy called Tucker stood with hands above his head, a frozen grin upon his face. On either side of Tucker stood a masked man with a gun.

The man beside Sinclair said, "Boys, looks like your little party was broke up. You better elevate your hands."

A man behind Gil Peters let out a pent-up breath. The sound seemed loud—a long, unnatural sigh.

Gil said: "I'm glad to see you, Smith. I reckon you're my friend. These others had me worried some."

The man beside Sinclair cut in before Jim could reply: "Step forward, Gil. You're all right now. We'll see to that."

But Peters did not move. Jim saw the boy's face turn slowly white. "They're holdin' me," he said.

A masked man back of Gil laughed stridently. "Damn right we're holdin' him! Smoke up, you boys! They can't sling lead without they hit the kid!"

Sinclair leaped suddenly toward the left, his right gun chopping down. The shot cracked out, the flame of it aimed seemingly at Peters' face. Jim saw Gil flinch. The man who held Gil's arm gave voice to one long gurgling scream. The room became a seething blur—a bedlam of men's voices cut by the staccato beat of guns—a smoky fog criss-crossed with lacing flame.

One of the men near Tucker lunged ahead as Sinclair fired, his own gun flipping up to fling a point-blank shot at Jim. Jim felt the flame of it across his cheek. He wheeled, his left gun thundering. The man went backward, struck the wall and fell, bent double over Sinclair's slug that struck waist high. Behind him now Jim heard the pound of other guns—knew that the Bar 9 man was in the fight. The second masked man by the deputy stood dazed, still motionless. He screamed as Jim's guns swung to aim. Jim did not fire.

"Reach high!" he barked, "and drop that gun!"

Someone behind him laughed. The sound seemed strangely out of place. Jim noticed that the guns were silent now. He lunged ahead and whirled, crouched in a corner of the room. From there he could command the scene. He waited, poised to meet the fire he half expected would rip through the screen of acrid, eddying smoke.

The silence held. Jim said, "You all right, Gil?" His voice seemed loud.

"So far, I am!" Gil's answer came from near at hand.

The smoke-screen split and Sinclair saw a man framed in the open door. He stood there, crouched, a six-gun held in front of him. He said: "You all right, Brick?"

Beyond Gil Peters, Sinclair made out the tall lean figure he had followed in that dash toward the jail. Jim heard him say: "Okay. We've got the kid. Round up the boys and bring the horses to the front."

He stooped and ripped the masks from the two sprawled figures on the floor near Gil. Jim straightened, conscious of a deep relief. The other man laughed softly as he stood erect. . . . And for the first time now Jim saw his face.

The man was Brick Kerhute.

CHAPTER FOUR

Even Break for One

SINCLAIR stood motionless, his brain awhirl. His guns, half-sheathed, hung poised in hands for once uncertain

of their course. Kerhute laughed quietly; the same cool laughter Jim had heard a moment past amid the thunder of the guns.

"You know me, eh?" The voice was calm, assured. Jim saw the speaker's gun, held carelessly, waist high, in lean long-fingered hands. The man was utterly relaxed, at ease. Yet he was wary, too.

"That shot of yours—the first one—saved both our hides," Kerhute said evenly. "They had me cold. I couldn't get a shot past Gil. But you clipped Patrick and when he went down he dragged the kid aside. I got the other one."

Sinclair relaxed and let his guns drop down into their sheaths. He grinned, a little crookedly. "And it was me oratin' just awhile ago on the virtue of carefulness . . . . I've played the trustin' fool this time. I took you for a Bar 9 man. . . . Okay. You win. What happens next?"

A pack of horsemen swirled around the corner of the jail and up the street. The drumming of the hoofs rang loudly in the momentary hush and Kerhute waited for the sound to cease. The man framed in the open door said, "Let's go, Brick." He wheeled, expecting that Kerhute would follow him, and disappeared.

Kerhute shoved both guns down into their sheaths. "This place will soon be gettin' hot," he said, and smiled. "We'd better drift."

But Sinclair did not move. "Not me," he said. "Nor Gil. I reckon you could take us, if you tried. You've got enough men to do it, sure. But we'd delay you some. . . . Gil, get that gun there on the floor by your left foot! And you, Kerhute; now that you've sheathed your guns I've got an even break with you."

Kerhute's lean body tensed. For just an instant Sinclair thought Kerhute would draw. Instead, he smiled. "Jim Smith," he drawled, "I'm some surprised at you! You used your head awhile ago. Why don't you use it now?"

"I am," Jim said. "I never asked more than an even break, Kerhute. And I've got that."

"A lot of men have had an even break with me." Kerhute's low voice was passionless, almost friendly. "But that's not what I'm thinkin' of. You come with us, you're safe and so is Gil. You can depend on that. But if you stay—Well, Patrick's dead. You killed him, Smith. That first sweet shot of yours caught Dan right in the mouth. So you're an outlaw now. It's strange, but when a man kills a sheriff he's an outlaw, no matter how big a skunk the sheriff was! And that applies to Gil. They'd lynch the pair of you."

This time it was Sinclair who grinned. "I reckon not," he said. "You see, Kerhute, my name ain't Smith. It's—"

He paused, his keen ears throbbing to the beat of swift, hard-hitting hoofs. A rifle shot cracked out, sharp and emphatic on the still night air. Outside the jail a six-gun spoke three times with stuttering haste and someone yelled.

Kerhute's gaze flicked toward the door. Jim dropped both hands to holstered guns and waited, motionless. He said: "There comes the Bar 9 now!"

THE rifle cracked again and this time Sinclair placed the sound of it. The gun was speaking from the south. The drum of hoofs was from the north. He grinned. "You're trapped, Kerhute," he said. "You're in between the Bar 9 and the town!"

A cold voice answered from behind Sinclair. "You're right, I reckon—and you're too damn cheerful, too. Shuck them guns slow and let 'em drop. I've got a bead right where your galluses would cross if you happened to be wearing 'em."

A tremor ran along Jim's arm—the urge to draw combating cold, hard common-sense. He drew both guns and let them fall. "Okay," he said. "But you're still trapped!"

A burst of gunfire rattled down the street as if to prove his prophecy. Jim turned his head. He had forgotten Tucker, Patrick's deputy, Gil's guard. The man stood now in the same spot where two masked men had covered him a while ago. But now his hands were down, the right hand leveling a gun. He grinned as Sinclair met his eyes.

Jim faced Kerhute again. Kerhute was grinning too. "You see," he said, "things aren't always what they seem. Ed Tucker works for me. It's nice to have a friendly deputy."

The front door filled with an incoming wave of men. Jim counted six; heard others at the back door of the jail. The last man in paused long enough to hurl a pair of shots along the street. He wheeled and slammed the door.

"By God, Kerhute, we're in a hole. The Bar 9 outfit just rode in, a dozen strong! And now the whole damn town—"

He broke off suddenly, his hot eyes focusing upon Sinclair. Sinclair spoke evenly. "Why, howdy, Buck. Long time no see. Last time we met you wore a prison suit."

The man called Buck spoke to Kerhute, his gaze still fixed upon Sinclair. "Brick, what's he doin' here?"

"You know him, Buck?" Kerhute's calm voice held casual interest, nothing more.

"I know him, sure! Jim Bonnet, Deputy United States Marshall, range detective for the Cattleman's Association—better known as The Whistler."

Jim said: "That's part of it. The last name is Sinclair—James Bonnet Sinclair. . . . And now we're tellin' our real names, what's yours?"

It was a careless taunt without intent or aim, and yet the startled look in Kerhute's eyes held stark and naked fear. An instant later it was gone and Kerhute's eyes resumed once more their impenetrable, reckless glint. But Kerhute took a long deep breath before he spoke.

"So you're The Whistler," he said softly. "If I'd known that I might not have been so confident about that even break you spoke about a while ago. I've heard of you."

He shrugged and smiled. "Thanks, Tucker. Keep an eye on him."

THE crash of gunfire which had dwindled as the Kerhute men fell back into the jail broke out anew as the attacking force found cover and began the seige. A rifle bullet smashed a window glass beside Sinclair and flung a shard of glass against his boot. He stepped aside, out of the line of fire.

Kerhute was busy manning the defense. A man crouched at a window across the room from where Jim stood, fired four quick shots and paused to slide fresh cartridges into his gun. Kerhute crossed over and bent down beside the man. Jim could not hear what Kerhute said but he saw the gunman's hand stray down as Kerhute spoke, and touch the cartridge belt around his waist. The fingers travelled back until they touched the first unfilled loop, then stopped. It was a warning to his men to save their lead.

It seemed fantastic to Sinclair that his should be a passive part in this. He moved impatiently and dropped into a chair—got up and shot a sidelong look at Tucker's gun. The deputy's cold eyes stared back at him. Jim shrugged.

Kerhute's ironic voice came from his left. "Not used to standin' idle in a fight, are you, Sinclair?"

He was twisting a cigarette as Sinclair

turned. His fingers moved with deft, swift grace and he was smiling almost happily. So what he said seemed strange. "I'm licked, Sinclair. Lead and water —those two things I lack. . . . But it'll be a damn good fight."

"I'm wonderin'," Sinclair said thoughtfully, "what brought you into this."

Kerhute glanced up at him. "I didn't come to kill the kid," he said emphatically.

"I gathered that," Sinclair agreed. "In fact, you risked your life to *keep* from killin' him when Patrick used him for a shield."

Kerhute's match flamed and touched his cigarette. He took a long, deep pull. "Ed Tucker works for me," he said slowly. "You found that out. But Patrick didn't know. . . . Dan Patrick hated Gil—wanted Gil's land, wanted Gil's girl. And so when Gil shot Sudermann Dan tossed him into jail. Says Dan: 'Here's just the chance I'm lookin' for. I'll jail the kid, then yank him out and string him up and lay the blame on Brick Kerhute!' . . . A real smart plan!"

"But poorly carried out," Jim said. "I smelled a rat. This Patrick was too damn set on makin' the arrest. I wondered why, him knowin' that a jury'd clear the kid. . . . But why all this to kill one man? A bullet in the back would do as well."

"It wouldn't, though. This country knew Dan hated Gil. If Gil goes down, the finger points to Dan. He either did the job or had it done. He can fix it so he won't be convicted, maybe. But a thing like that looks bad—and Dan was deep in politics. He didn't dare to buck that kind of talk. Besides, Gil had some influential friends; Jock Sutherland, for one. . . . But this way Dan figured he was safe. His deputy, on guard, would swear he recognized Kerhute. Revenge —that was the motive Patrick had all figured out for me. . . . Imagine me avengin' Sudermann!"

Jim said: "My imagination's all worn out. Go on."

"Dan needed help," Kerhute went on. "He had five men that he could trust. Ed Tucker was one of them. He was to be the one on guard, the other four to alibi themselves and Dan. But Tucker sent a man hell-bent for me."

He paused and shrugged. "That's all of it. We should've worked together, you and I. Too many cooks, you see. The Bar 9 outfit hornin' in—I didn't look for that."

A burst of gunfire smashed against the jail's front door and for a moment neither spoke. Then Sinclair said, "But why, Kerhute? What's Gil to you?"

Outside somewhere a man yelled Kerhute's name.

Kerhute turned instantly and walked toward the door. "All right, I'm here. What's on your mind?"

"You're there, all right; and you're trapped! The jail's surrounded. Your only chance is to surrender now!"

"What if I don't?" Kerhute called back.

"Here's what! We've got some dynamite. You men come out of there without your guns or else we'll blast you out!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Dynamite Bluff

THE guns inside the jail were silent now as men turned startled faces to Kerhute. Grim faces, hard and powder-marked; yet in them now Sinclair saw fear. These men were fighting men, inured to death, almost contemptuous of it. But dynamite—That was an enemy they could not fight—a smashing, rending force against which guns were pitifully inadequate.

But Kerhute laughed. His deep full-chested laughter filled the room and rang across the street. "Where I learned to play poker," he shouted, "it was a house rule that when a man was caught bluffin' he lost the pot. You're bluffin', and—you lose! You won't use dynamite. I've got Gil Peters here, and one of Patricks' deputies—not to mention a man named Smith."

He paused and flashed a white-toothed grin toward Sinclair. "Smith is the man who saw the shootin' yesterday. Only his real name isn't Smith. It's James Bonnet Sinclair, better known as The Whistler. He owns the Sinclair Cattle Company, Sutherland. You've dealt with him. What's more, he's a Deputy U. S. Marshall. You wouldn't want to blow him up!"

Sinclair said: "That's right! Go on and rub it in! This is a real embarrassin' predicament for me. This thing of actin' hostage for a man I aimed to get—"

"You've got me, haven't you?" Kerhute's reply was friendly, generous. "That ought to comfort you."

No answer came from the outside and Kerhute's men took heart again. The guns resumed their intermittent chatterings. Gil Peters came to stand beside Sinclair.

"This thing's my fault," he said unhappily. "That threat of dynamite would force them out of here. But Kerhute knows they won't risk hurtin' me."

"And me," Jim said. "I hope they're thinkin' some of me. But maybe not. I don't deserve consideration, that's a cinch!"

He made his tone light to ease Gil's mood. The effort failed. Gil shook his head. "You're here on my account," he said. "That's my fault, too. If there was only somethin' I could do. . . ."

A man's voice, shrill and keen with agony, rang out from somewhere down the street and, in the jail, a man at a front window yelled exhultantly. "There's one that won't be botherin' us no more," he gloated. "Man, that was a shot!"

"That's my fault, too," Gil said. "They are wastin' men out there to save my hide."

He turned away and Sinclair watched him moving restlessly about the room. Ed Tucker watched him, too; but Tucker's interest was different from Sinclair's.

THE hours dragged on endlessly. Sinclair sat down at last and closed his eyes. "If I could get a gun!" he thought. "I know just how Gil feels. I couldn't stand up long against this pack, but I might thin 'em out. A fight in here might give the men outside a chance to close in, anyway. If I could get a gun. . . ."

But, looking out between tight-slitted lids, he saw Ed Tucker watching him. The deputy's cold stare was maddening. "He's like a cat," Jim thought. "And I'm the mouse. I make a move—he bats me down!"

Faint, almost imperceptible at first, a tinge of gray diluted the black night outside. The lamplight in the jail began to fade, took on a sickly pallor as the daylight came. Kerhute leaned easily against the wall beside a window facing on the street, taking no part in the exchange of shots but speaking softly now and then to the two men who crouched beneath the window sill. The growing light fell on his face and Sinclair saw that it was lined and gaunt.

But he was smiling when he turned to face the room and Sinclair marveled at the change that smile performed in him. He was bareheaded now. The brick-red hair was a tousled mop that gave him a youthful air. His voice was light, unstressed, as if the thing that he proposed were nothing but a routine, pleasant task.

"Well, boys, looks like we'd have to

make a run for it." He glanced from man to man, his smile infectious. "There's a vacant lot across the street from here between the Verde Hotel and Jimmy's Bar. Used to be another building there, so neither the Hotel nor the Bar have windows facin' it. And there's horses over there—the Bar 9 mounts and some of ours and some that Patrick's bunch turned loose. If we had known the broncs were there we might've tried this earlier; but I reckon this is best, at that. The light is bad for shootin' now. That much is on our side."

He paused. "I'm not promisin' we'll get away," he said. "You see just what we're up against. The street is pretty wide—a damn sight wider now than it has ever looked to me before! . . . And even if we get across there'll still be plenty hell before we clear the town. But it's a chance."

Again a pause, while Sinclair heard the heavy breathing of the men who filled that room. "This thing is all my fault," Kerhute went on. "I had a reason—a purely personal one. You can call it a selfish one, if you like. But I didn't think that we could lose. . . . I'm sorry, boys. Not sorry that I came, but sorry that I brought you into this."

That pause was broken by another voice. "Hell, we ain't kickin', Brick. You've took us through worse spots than this."

Kerhute said, "Thanks. . . . Don't get me wrong. I'm not orderin' any man to try to cross that street. I reckon most of us will drop. Some of you could give yourselves up and maybe draw light sentences. You've got that choice. A man's a fool to throw his life away, and what I'm offerin' you is sure a long-odds bet. I'm takin' it myself because I'd rather take a bullet than a rope."

Sinclair stood up and crossed the room to stand beside the window where Kerhute had stood. The street was wide. And for Kerhute it would be laced with stinging death. But it was possible, Jim thought. A long-odds bet, but still a gambling chance. And yonder in the vacant lot were horses. Not enough for all the men penned in the jail, but then not all of them would need mounts.

Jim turned to meet Kerhute's half-smiling eyes. "I'd hate to tackle it, Kerhute," he said. "But if you do, I'm damned if I don't wish you luck!"

"You don't have to tackle it, Sinclair. In my place, though, I think you would."

He turned. "Well, boys? I'll lead the way. Who's comin' with me? Load your guns. With luck we may smash through."

He reached out confidently and unlatched the door. He made a gallant figure standing there, his red head high, a smile upon his lips. The door swung in an inch or two.

A MOVEMENT just beyond Kerhute caught Sinclair's eye. Gil Peters stood against the wall at Kerhute's right. his body rigid, tensed as if to spring. A warning clicked in Sinclair's brain. His voice cracked out: "Don't do it, Gil!" It came too late.

Gil lunged, hands streaking out to Kerhute's guns. His shoulder struck Kerhute and flung him back. The guns came free. Instinctively, Jim wheeled and shot his fist to Tucker's jaw. The deputy had glanced aside as Peters dived toward Kerhute and it was that split second's breach of vigilance that gave Sinclair his chance. The man went down. Gil's voice, keyed high with strain, rang out as Sinclair dived for Tucker's gun.

"Don't move, Kerhute! I was a shield awhile ago—this time, you're it! . . . You others, freeze! You might get me, but there's a cocked gun pressin' Kerhute's ribs. If I go down that gun'll shoot!"

Sinclair came up, Ed Tucker's gun

clutched in his hand. Gil Peters stood, half crouched, his back toward the door, one of the captured guns jammed under Kerhute's ribs. The tension held, but only momentarily. Sinclair knew that. The boy did not. These men were desperate. Ten men, besides Kerhute, whose lives already hung upon a thread. No power on earth could hold them long at bay, Jim knew.

Jim thought that they'd call Gil's bluff, and when they did both he and Gil would go down. But what the hell. . . .

On both sides Jim felt the stir as Kerhute's men recovered from their first surprise. The room was large; too large for Jim or Gil or both of them to cover all of it. And there were men at the back door, at the end of the shallow corridor between the cells. Those men could shoot at will.

Jim's steady voice reached out into the hush. "You stand a better chance out in the street, Kerhute," he said. "There's only two of us but we'll take some of you along."

"I know," Kerhute said calmly. "Well, youngster, what's your plan?"

"You're comin' out of here," Gil said. "Sinclair and me, and you. With us outside, I reckon this fight won't last so very long!"

Jim was amazed to see a smile on Kerhute's lips. He shrugged indifferently. "Okay," he said. "It's all right, boys. Don't interfere. When I'm gone you can still make a run for it. I had a hunch I —wouldn't get through, anway."

Sinclair relaxed. Perhaps it might work, after all. He felt the indecision that Kerhute's command bred in his men. If that held long enough. . . .

His gaze swung to the door. Kerhute had slipped the latch so that the door swung free. The crack of daylight widened as he looked and Sinclair saw that Gil stood outlined in that opening. Gil's back was to the street, a target for the men outside. Sinclair's voice rasped out.

"Gil! Step aside! The door—"

He saw Kerhute's head turn. He saw the outlaw's body tense, the smile dissolving from his face. A rifle cracked out in the street and Gil flinched back. That slug had missed, but narrowly. Kerhute flung out his arm, his body following, his open palm against Gil's chest.

Gil fired instinctively. Kerhute's straight arm had flung Gil back out of that lethal square that was the door, but as he reeled Gil let the hammer of Kerhute's big gun go down.

The slug struck low in Kerhute's chest. He straightened, halted by the blow. Now he instead of Gil stood silhouetted in that open door and from the street a burst of rifle fire drowned out the echoes of Gil's shot. Kerhute's tall body shook as lead beat into him. He sagged and Sinclair dived across the opening, his body driving Kerhute's to one side.

They fell, and suddenly the guns outside were still. Gil's voice cut through the hush, pitched high and loud. "Don't shoot, out there! It's me—Gil Peters—and I'm comin' out!"

CHAPTER SIX

Death of a Hero

GIL wheeled and dived out through the door. Sinclair could hear the thud-thud of the youngster's feet as he ran out across the road. A man beside a front window growled an oath and raised his gun. Kerhute, still wrapped in Sinclair's arms, spoke with surprising force.

"Don't shoot him! Let him go!"

Sinclair sat up, still holding Tucker's gun. Kerhute stared up at him. "You tried to save my life!" he said, wonderingly. "Now, why?"

"You've saved the kid's life twice," Jim

said. "I'm askin' you the same question: Why?"

But men closed in around them before Kerhute could answer. A burly giant stooped. "Come on, Kerhute. We're goin' out. I'll carry you."

Kerhute shook his head. "Don't touch me, boys. I'm shot to pieces—can't last long. You go head. Here's luck!"

He smiled and waved toward the door. Outside, a waiting silence lay upon the town. Inside the jail, men swallowed hard and hitched their gun-belts up. The big man gulped and dragged the back of one huge hand across his eyes.

"So long then, Brick," he muttered huskily; and lunged toward the door. The others followed him by two's and three's—a stream of men erupting through a bullet-riddled door into a sunlit street.

The guns outside awoke with insane chattering. Kerhute's eyes closed. His jaw was grimly set, his body tense. Jim turned to face the door. The noise outside was deafening; the bark of six-guns mingling with the sharper crack of the rifles. Men dropped, but some ran on. One man snatched at the reins of Sinclair's buckskin yonder in the vacant lot. He tried to mount. The gelding lunged and shook him off. The man wheeled instantly and grabbed another horse.

The noise died down, then swelled again as men's excited voices drowned the echoes of the guns. Sinclair glanced down at Brick Kerkute.

"Six got away," he said.

Kerhute relaxed. A moment passed before he spoke. "Well, that ends the Kerhute gang," he said. "I'm—glad—"

Jim said: "I'll get a doctor now. Maybe—"

But Kerhute said: "No. I'm through, Sinclair. There's only one thing you can do for me."

"What's that?"

"Take out my watch."

Sinclair obeyed. The watch was gold, suspended on a heavy chain. "Now what?" he asked.

"Pry up the back of it."

The back came open easily. An inner cover lay exposed and on it Sinclair saw three lines of lettering, deeply etched, with cannons crossed above a shield.

To Captain Gilbert Peters
fine officer, fine gentleman, fine friend
From Battery B

Kerhute was smiling when Jim met his gaze once more. "That was—a long, long time ago," he said. "That man came West soon after that. He was impatient, impetuous, a little wild. He was going to make a fortune—be a cattle king. Instead, he lost, went broke. . . . He robbed a bank. His wife came out to join him. When she arrived he was in jail. . . . She never knew. . . . She gave birth to a son, and died. . . . Not a pretty story, eh, Sinclair? Not one a man would want—his son—to know? That's why I didn't want that watch found on me, see?"

Jim's voice was very low. "Then you're—?"

"Gil's father. Now you know the answer to those 'whys' you asked. I couldn't let Dan Patrick murder him. . . . You keep that watch, Sinclair. He's not to know, you understand! I'm trustin' you. He's clean—and game. A fine, sweet girl's in love with him. You let 'em—bury Brick Kerhute, Sinclair. Gil Peters died a long, long time ago."

The watch case clicked as Sinclair snapped it shut. "Right," he said.

THE outlaw closed his eyes and smiled. A moment later Jim stood up, a stinging moisture in his eyes. The room seemed oddly empty now. Yonder, at the mouth of the corridor that led back between the cells, Dan Patrick's body, loosely sprawled, made an ugly blotch

against the white pine floor. Beside it lay another shape—and to the left, against the wall, a second one of Patrick's deputies lay dead, one clenched hand touched by sunlight streaming through the shattered glass. Patrick's other deputy, and Tucker, Kerhute's spy, had gone. Perhaps they lay dead yonder in the street—perhaps they had escaped. And near the door was the long lean body of Kerhute.

He turned and walked toward the door. A deep voice said: "I'm Sutherland. You've done a good job here, Sinclair. For Verde, and for the State."

"Not me," Jim said emphatically. "I just looked on."

Gil Peters clutched his arm. "Kerhute?" he said. "Is he—?"

"Kerhute is dead," Jim said.

Gil's face went white. "Did I—?"

Jim shook his head. "I reckon not," he said, slowly. "You—must've missed. It was the shootin' from outside that cut him down."

The color came back slowly into Peter's face. "I'm glad of that," he said. "Why, he—he saved my life! My back was to the door. The boys outside couldn't tell who I was. Kerhute jumped at me—knocked me out of line. It startled me. I thought—I didn't realize till later what he'd done."

Jock Sutherland said, "Hell! He jumped at you to get his guns! He was a wolf! Don't try to make a hero out of him, just cause he's dead. He meant to lynch you, kid—him and that other skunk, Dan Patrick, workin' in cahoots. You're lucky this turned out the way it did. Ain't that the truth, Sinclair?"

Jim's right hand lifted slowly to the pocket of his shirt. A gold watch nestled there—a watch Jock Sutherland and Gil would never see. . . . And Brick Kerhute was dead.

"You may be right," he said.

THE END

In The Next Issue Of Dime Western!

Once A Cattle King

A new novelette by

ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

November 1st Dime Western - - - - Out October 12th!

Now Twice a Month!

by Malcolm Reiss

HOLSTERED

The magic Colts of Juniper Ridge's gun-king were strangely silenced—yet a man crippled in soul as well as in the body can battle any bullet-odds, provided he has Orn Medary's brand of courage.

ORN MEDARY was finished! Orn Medary was through! The winner of a score of the most bloody gun-fights the Half Moon country had ever known, had finally, in his turn, fallen to the powder and lead by which he had lived. But Orn had not been bested by one of his many lightning-fast, gun-slinging enemies. With that sardonic twist that fate sometimes gives to life he had been dropped by a stray bullet from a target-shooting kid's little .22.

Juniper Ridge already knew the story, and it was spreading rapidly all over the Half Moon. Orn would never be able to work that nimble arm of his again. The bullet had blasted nerve and muscle. He could still rope or brand yearlings and

DEATH

Novelette of Range Courage

do other light indelicate jobs but for a race to leather, for a life and death showdown, it would be of no use at all. It meant that Orn Medary was as dead as if he were packed in a box and buried in Boot-hill—for Medary had sown a goodly crop of foes.

Orn faced Doc Carter in his cool back room.

"No more guns, Medary. No more trouble making. That muscle's apt to knot on you any time and then it would be just too bad."

"Yes?" said Orn.

"That ain't all. Your arm'll be a little stiff, a little slow. Do I make myself clear."

"You sure do," said Orn in his biting way.

The young rancher's bitter, rather fine face, was twisted in a sullen grimace. He envied the doctor sitting there, playing with the heavy watch chain and great dangling seal. Thus he played with men's fates, calmly, comfortably. Orn envied him because he had the power to pronounce sentence: "No more guns, Medary." He envied him too, secretly, be-

cause all the country worshipped old Doc Carter and swore by him.

As Orn strode out his ingrown bitterness against people suddenly came to the surface. His first impulse was to climb aboard his bronc and head out of town for the open range where he was free to think. And then he thought how it would look—as if he were running away—so he changed his mind and strode down the quiet street following the shade of the huge cottonwoods.

Orn had the feelings of a man who walks into ambush. He knew that the crippling of his right arm would be the signal for half a dozen men to come and get him. He smiled his bitter smile, counting his enemies. There were plenty—men he had fought in boundary disputes, men he had wounded, men he had made eat dirt, brothers of men who had fallen before his smoking muzzle. But he'd always fought fairly and, as he walked down the side-walk with the frowsy ends of the cottonwoods dusting his shoulders, he carried his head high. No friends—but when his enemies finally buried him, when all that was ugly had been said, they would remember one thing: "Always in fair fight!"

He came to the raw-board Cattlemens' Rest and flung up the steps. He crossed the veranda, tall, straight, completely aloof. There was one man in particular who'd like this news—Foulois, Dude Foulois, Orn's particular enemy. Dude was everything that Orn wasn't—gay, amiable, a great talker, an all-round good fellow. They hated each other with the hate of two cross-bred coyote dogs.

Their enmity was perfectly natural. They were neighbors in a country where neighbors battled incessantly within their badly demarcated boundaries. Orn's ranch marched with the Dude's on one side, on the other with the Ghent brothers' outfit. He had fought with them too, but Foulois was a greater thorn in his side. That these two had never fought it out was only proof that each respected the calibre of the other. But that would be different now.

As Orn jingled into the long, worn parlor of the Cattlemen's Rest, much decorated with bright calendars from various packing companies, Mrs. Damon the proprietress came out of the kitchen.

"Oh Mr. Medary, I hear you hurt your arm just terrible," she said. "That's an awful pity, Mr. Medary."

"Ain't it," Orn drawled.

A hurt expression jerked the corners of Mrs. Damon's mouth. "When I heard about the accident I took the liberty of packin' your outfit an' putting it in the big front room. There's a bed in there that's real wide and deep and soft and even a cripple could rest comfortable there."

A light snapped in Orn's eyes, but his face remained impassive. "I've shoved my stock aboard the cars, Mrs. Damon, and I figure I'll be movin' along. So you find another cripple for that fine bed of yours!"

Orn started up the stairs. Then he remembered he had decided to stick in Juniper Ridge so he turned back.

"Hey wait," he called. Then, seeing Mrs. Damon with her face buried in her apron, he stopped, taken aback. Finally he called, "You can leave my stuff where it is for tonight," and tramped on up the stairs.

If Orn had given them half a chance, folks might have almost been friendly towards him. In spite of his angry, dangerous look he had a certain subtle charm about him. Women especially took to him, as much as he allowed. Fat, motherly women were always trying to get him to let them mother him, for at thirty Orn still bore a resemblance at times to a little boy of ten. He also drew the type of belles you sometimes find around lively cow-towns, the sort that takes to break-

ing men the way men take to breaking bad horses. Even men might have liked him, but his reputation as a bad one made them steer clear. Orn didn't quite know it himself, but he was lonely. He had been lonely all his life.

All that night and the next morning Orn ran into little acts of kindness that rubbed him like sand on a raw wound. He hated pity. He hated the feeling of weakness which all this gave him. And then he ran up against the cooling influence of Marcia Carter, and he didn't like that either. . . .

ORN had just come out of Doc Carter's office after telling the doctor just where he could head in. He had no intention of hanging around town and having a silly wound like that treated every day. Besides it was dangerous. He was going back to the ranch where he belonged. He backed out and ran into the girl.

"What makes you so disagreeable?" she asked.

For a moment Orn was taken aback. He really hadn't realized he was being disagreeable. But the girl was prettier than any young girl had a right to be who could also be so impersonal. There certainly was no hackamore in her hand.

"I reckon it's my nature, Miss," said Orn.

She stood two steps above him staring directly into his eyes. "The trouble with you is that everybody has played up to you too much. They made you think you're Murietta, General Custer and old Chief Geronimo rolled into one, and rolled awfully tight, too. Maybe you are, but why act that way about it?"

Orn thought that maybe she wouldn't have laughed at him if his arm was still good.

"You better remember what Paw just told you," she said. "He knows what he's talking about and that's more than you do."

Her lips smiled in a way that would have been particularly ruinous to any cattleman's self-esteem. It made Orn feel as if someone had roweled him deep and he could think of no way of getting back, no twist of speech that would cut her the way she cut him. No way at all, except one. . . .

He looked up, smiling that bland smile of his that made his face into a finely-chiseled mask—and then he kissed her. He reached out with his left arm and tumbled her off her high perch onto his chest so that she naturally clung to him, head up. So he bent his head and kissed her squarely on the mouth. For a moment he forgot to be angry. She twisted her face away. He put her back on the step, raised his hand politely, and said, "So long!"

Then he turned and jingled down the hall to the screen door and out of the house. As he went his spurs lisped after him. Under the cottonwoods the restless red mare was standing. Orn closed the reins over the mane and swept lightly aboard. And as he loped down the street he thought back to the girl and gave a deep chuckle. For a one-armed man he had sure come out well. He grinned at the thought.

THERE was one tie that Orn Medary had which placed him in a catagory with other humans—that was his love for his dogs. Like most range-bred people he took cow-horses for granted. They were part of the picture and you treated them well because you needed them. But the hounds were different.

In Orn's wandering, unhappy youth an old hound had attached itself to him and wouldn't leave him. He was a queer-looking dog, three parts this and one part that, but the general effect was hound. Certainly his disposition was the weird

disposition of a hound, and the morose expression went with it. And now, on his ranch up at Antelope Creek, there were a whole lazy pack of the lineal descendants of the first dog, Zig.

Riding along the Muleticenas trail, Orn noticed a couple of streamers of rain in the foothills of the Half Moons. It was pretty late for rain. The Calvary River might be in flood.

He kept on riding, scanning the distant hills with anxious eyes and watching the trail ahead. There had been some talk lately about the Young Bunch being back in the Half Moon, having found that the country up to the north was not so good for their murdering and rustling. But he figured that they wouldn't be in so close to Juniper Ridge.

A wild booming sound came to Orn's ears—the Calvary on the rampage. The red horse snorted and tossed her head, stepping sidewise. On the high bank above, Orn looked down on a river roiling and sucking in a crazy eddy.

Most the time the Calvary was the gentlest of streams, feeding only a faint trickle of water down its bed. But when it picked up a storm from the hills, it became a tumultous shoot. Today Orn saw a dead cow bobbing briskly amongst the cannon-trunked willows.

Ordinarily Orn would have dismounted and sat down quietly to roll himself a smoke and wait. But today he saw a challenge in everything. His very weakness acted as a spur. The sucking, murmuring water mulled through his head. Tossing aside his shuck, Orn slid the reins tight and plunged the red down the bank. They hit with a muddy splash, went under and came up again.

Like most cowmen, Orn hadn't the vaguest idea of how to swim, except that it helped in some way to hold your breath. Still he didn't try to turn the red horse's head towards the near bank. The horse was working hard, desperately, to keep above water. It no longer had that sure swimming motion of the range bronc. It plunged, raising its flat-eared head high above the brown water, then sank, came up again. Orn clasped the saddle horn with his one good arm. He found that his head was light, a trifle dizzy, and it dawned on him that there might have been some sense in what Doc Carter had said. Then a half submerged cottonwood struck them, grazed Orn's knee, hitting the red in the belly. The strong horse went under.

Orn wasn't sure what happened the next few seconds. He sank. He came up with a mouth full of water and more of it choking his throat. He clutched out wildly. Part of his brain was going slowly, the other part was racing. His left hand found something slimy and again he went under.

Unconsciously he opened his eyes beneath the surface and was amazed to find how light it was down there. Again he came to the surface to take one last desperate gulp of air. He knew vaguely that he was clinging to the log but it was no good. It wouldn't hold him. It gave under his weight like quicksand.

IT speaks well for Orn that even at this last moment no panic seized him. His mind was clear, fast moving. But he did not think back as most drowning people are said to. He thought ahead. Perhaps this was the best fate for him. The guns of all his enemies would go hungry now. He was cheating hungry guns. He only hoped they wouldn't think that this was a short-cut.

The cottonwood swelled to the surface and Orn came up for the third time. He was so nearly drowned that it did not seem to matter greatly. For a moment his ears, freed of the pressure, caught a shouting. It might have been a human voice but he had not the strength to tell. For one second he opened his eyes

above the muddy river for a quick glimpse of land and sky before he was dragged down into those golden depths for ever. Something slapped his face. He felt a rope tighten around his head and jaw. Then he lost consciousness. When he came to a few minutes later there was a terrible throbbing in his head. For a moment he didn't even feel the pain of his injured arm.

"How goes it?"

The sound of that voice was unpleasant to Orn and he tried to clear away the webs that clogged his brain.

"You'll be all right in a minute, fella. Jes' take her easy."

Orn stared up. He saw a broadly smiling face against a background of galloping clouds. The clouds dizzied him.

"You, Foulois!"

The Dude's handsome, ruddy face broke into wrinkles of laughter.

"It sure musta been a shock to wake up and find me bendin' over you. Why don't you shuck yore boots the next time you figure on takin' a swim?"

Slow anger dispersed Orn's dizziness. Foulois was laughing at him. Well—having dragged him out of the water like a bogged cow—maybe he had a right to laugh.

"You shouldn't try stunts like that when you got a bum arm."

The Dude pushed back his hat brim, squatted on the wet brown sand so that his crooked vaquero heels sank in,

"So you know about my arm?"

"Sure. This is a small country."

Orn looked at Foulois and his bitter anger grew. A week before the Dude would have been real pleased if he'd drowned. Maybe he would have even assisted some. But now that Orn's arm had gone back on him it was a different thing. The Dude would rather that he lived. He could go out and plug him any day now—just like quail you've been feeding from the doorstep.

Orn pushed himself to his feet. He was still desperately weak and his arm felt as if someone had taken a red-hot branding iron and jabbed it deeply into the wound. "I guess you expect me to thank you real cordial for snaring me out of there?" he said.

Foulois glanced up. He did not even bother to get to his feet.

"Why sure."

Orn's lips curved down. "Well guess again. Listen to me, Dude, I ain't done yet, not by a long sight. You watch out, savvy?"

With that Orn moved off, unsteadily, a wry smile on his face and a pain in his heart. He would show them, these enemies of his, that he was still a man to be reckoned with.

From the brown beach under the shade of the willows, Dude Foulois, still hunkered on his heels and watched his neighbor climb unevenly up the bank. At last he gave a shrug, a very expressive shrug, the last of his Gallic heritage. Then he put his hands on his knees and rose stiffly, coiling his slimy lass rope. He had meant to say a few words to Orn Medary, to try and make peace. But Medary had cut him off too soon. Dude was checked short.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dead Return

THE YOUNG BUNCH as they were called had never been considered a boon to the Half Moon country. Even tough customers such as the Ghents, Dude Foulois, and Orn himself, had always breathed easier. The Young Bunch were tearing up range to the north or west some place. But it was really the Young Bunch that were the means of saving Orn's life.

It was just a litle after he got to the ranch and, feeling queer and hot, had

dropped down on a cot when the sound of a pony at full run roused him a little. He saw that it was Lytel, the puncher from the north range, and he had every intention of raising the devil with him for running the legs off a Flying M horse when the puncher threw himself out of the saddle and bounded up the steps.

"Medary!" he cried. "Heh Medary!" Lytel burst into the room. "They're at it again! They're back, the whole bunch of 'em. Right in broad daylight they cut out half a hundred head and drove 'em off. They almost got me."

Orn Medary tried to push himself up out of the cot but all that he could do was stare at his excited puncher whose face had been ripped and scratched by the brush and whose eyes were wide in his dusty face. The Young Bunch was nothing to be laughed at. They had killed so many men that it did not matter any more. They knew that if they were caught they would hang by the neck quicker than you could yip. Their only safety lay in terrorizing and they played that hand for all they were worth, knowing that their time, at best, was not very long.

Orn knew that he should get up and buckle on his gun belt, but there was no strength in him. He was too feverish to really remember that his arm, too, was worthless. He saw that Lytel was eyeing him peculiarly, but all that he could do was sink back and growl, "Get away. Get away."

Lytel came a step closer. "Golly, you're sick," he said. "I didn't know. I'll go get the Doc."

Orn closed his eyes. He wanted to be left alone. "Git!"

The lanky, slow-witted puncher stood for a moment trying to decide what to do. He decided that one way or the other he'd better hightail for town. He could get the sheriff and the doctor at the same time. "I'll put you down in the shed by the lick so the Bunch won't find you if they come." He tried to help Orn up. But Orn only cursed him and made himself heavy. So Lytel left him and, as he galloped rapidly down the lane away from the ranch house he heard one of the hounds lift it's head in the powdery dusk and begin to howl as dogs do when a man is dying. Lytel curved lower in the saddle, shuddering.

BUT Orn didn't die. He was too tough —too unlucky perhaps—to die. Exertion and the wound had lead to fever, but Doc Carter knew how to deal with that.

Orn was quite conscious, though strangely light-headed, all the time that Lytel was away. He was aware of the spotted hounds wandering worriedly through the room. He could hear them on the veranda as they lay down with that decisive thump that hounds give.

Towards morning he heard an owl hoot sleepily as if tired and bored by its hunt. He thought he heard ponies once, ponies coming recklessly fast, and he thought it might be the Young Bunch and he wondered idly if they'd gun him. With one thing and another it didn't mater much. If they killed him, that would be right too for he knew, he had always known, that it was because of the feuds around Juniper Ridge that this bunch of outlaws were able to work the range in the Half Moon.

If he and the Ghents and Foulois and Fay and a few of the other small outfits could get together once instead of continually squabbling they could clean up the Young Bunch so quick that they'd be history in no time. But the idea of joining with Dude Foulois — Foulois who was keeping him alive just so as to break him slowly under his gun-threat—was only a madman's dream. Orn laughed a low, cracked laugh. The hounds raised their heads and then dropped them heavily back on their paws.

Later Orn fell into a troubled sleep and about mid-morning the next day was awakened by the sound of many ponies and by the terrific bellowing of the hounds. They drove off Doc Carter and the sheriff and the whole posse which was on its way after the Young Bunch. It was Marcia Carter finally who walked in amongst the defiant animals and when they heard Orn speak to her they seemed to know it was all right and trotted away to the irrigation ditch to cool off.

When Orn saw Marcia bending over him, her hand on his shoulder and her smooth, clear forehead which lent her face a deceptive serenity, wrinkled in a worried frown, he grew polite. "What's the matter?" he said as though something were the matter with her.

She looked at him with a sort of impatient amusement. "You're a stubborn fool. Foulois told us how you tried to cross the river."

"Foulois!" That awakened an angry feeling in Orn's fever-drained mind. "You a friend of Foulois? Foulois figures he has me now, but he ain't. Foulois . . . "

By then Doc Carter had gotten by the deep-down growling of the hounds. Marcia stood back looking down on the thin, waster face on the cot. He had relaxed the sneer with which he faced the world. He didn't look contemptuous. It was the same expression you see on a small boy who has gotten into some devilment and needs his elders to pull him out. Orn was feeling sick and for perhaps the first time in his life he looked appealing.

Doc Carter felt his pulse, touched his brow. "You sure done yourself up brown this time," he growled.

IT was a good thing that the doctor came when he did for Orn was pretty sick. But bit by hit his range-conditioned body pulled back to health. Marcia, who since she had come home from school in the east, had become something of a nurse, took care of him. It seemed to her that his body grew better, but somewhere deep down he was still sick.

And this was the truth—For Orn Medary was brooding and as his strength increased so did his venom. He knew that he would get over his fever and his arm would heal, but he knew too that he would still be a weakling. The incident on the river drove the lesson even deeper. Foulois was not going to merely shoot him down. He was going to play with him first—tantalize him—perhaps try and break him down and make him into a coward.

At that thought he gave a brittle laugh and Marcia, sitting by his side on the pleasant, sun-dappled veranda of the Flying M, looked up.

"What's the matter?" she asked, her eyes anxious. Those two weeks of nursing Orn had shown Marcia a few things. She didn't like him any better. She still though he was a high-handed brutal sort of man, and yet she had to admit to herself that he had a carefully concealed other side. He was interesting when he wasn't busy being mean. She sighed to herself for she knew that she might become very attracted to a man like Orn. She would never in the world marry him; she had too much sense for that. And yet if she grew to care for him it would spoil everything that might come after. That moment, watching Orn's calm expressionless face with the twirling light and shade of euclyptus leaves passing across it, and the sound of the ever-present hounds sleeping in the sun, she made up her mind to leave right away.

When she had asked her question Orn had been thinking, pressing his brain for a way to trick his evil-wishers. He

thought of trapping them in some mountain canyon, he thought of a hundred different plans, none of which were worth a damn.

She said, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

She drew herself up decisively and put aside the grey sweater that she was knitting for her father.

"I've decided to go back to Juniper Ridge tomorrow."

"You have," said Orn without showing much interest or much disappointment.

That seemed to annoy her for she vexedly put aside a stray hair. "Oh," she said, as if expecting to be contradicted, "you can get along all right without me. You're perfectly all right except for your right arm and you do very well with the left. I notice you can even take the capsuls out of the medicine bottle and screw back the top."

"Yes," he drawled, "I reckon I can get along."

"You really can do everything with your left arm," she persisted.

"Yep," he repeated.

If she was in a hurry to pull out it was all right with him. He had thought she was enjoying it out at the ranch, at least in a way. He had tempted himself with the idea that he might get her to stay awhile. Maybe he might. . . .

The Flying M was as pleasant a layout as you could find in a deal of riding. You came up a lane of tremendous, pie-bald-trunked euclyptuses to a low house set at the bottom of a lazy hill. On one side ran the creek, making just the faintest of musing noises as it drawled along. Madrone and plushy hazelnut bushes grew along the creek banks, mixing greens under the dusty sky. And on the other side was an alfalfa field, vividly blue-gray and soft and fragrant as wild violets. In front of the ranch-house, spanned by a bridge of rubble-work that Orn had put up himself, ran the water-course that connected the creek with the alfalfa field. Yes, the Flying M was a pleasant place—if you could stand the company.

This is what Orn thought when Marcia Carter said she was going. If he had been surer of himself he might have made some sign that he wanted the girl to stay on, as he certainly did. But he thought she detested him the way he thought all the people in the Half Moon detested him, and he was too proud, too bitter, to do anything about it.

IT was not until the next morning after Marcia had said good-bye and driven off in the buck-board escorted by Lytel that the clue to his salvation came back to Orn Medary.

His mind had been feeling back over the last two weeks, retrieving one by one the things she had said to him; that he had said to her. There was not much, for Orin himself had long been accustomed to silence and Marcia was no great prattler. He came to the place where she had told him she was leaving—Orn dwelt on this part particularly—and he remembered she had said: "You really can do everything with your left arm." That was what she had said.

He raised it and placed it on the sun-warmed rail of the veranda to examine it. For the first time in his life he really put his left hand away from him and examined it as if it were foreign to the rest of him—a tool, an interesting machine. The truth was that he always had been able to use his left better than most men. When he was a kid he had started to learn to write with it until the teacher broke him of the habit. He had kept it up for a while as a trick to show off before the other kids.

Orn looked at his hand and then it struck him: "That's it!" There it was sitting on the rail before him—his way

through. A snort came from him, pleased, triumphant. Foxey, the eldest of all the hounds, the one that never left him to roam afield, raised his head and threw Orn a generally sympathetic look and beat his boney tail a dozen slow times on the boards.

That's it, thought Orn. They think I'm through but they sure think wrong. I'll do it. I'll learn to handle a gun with my left just like I did with my right.

CHAPTER THREE

Gun Jest

IF Marcia Carter could have seen Orn a week from then she would have been amazed and a little startled. The lethargy had swooped from his spirit. The strong color had come back to his cheeks and even he knew that his wounded right arm was improving each day. Soon he was wandering around in the vicinity of the ranch house with a gun strapped low on his left thigh and the hounds, amiable but everlastingly sad, at his heels. Up where the creek had cut out a piece of bank he rigged a tin pie-plate to a sapling and wasted the price of half a cow each day shooting at it, making it dance and sing in the sun.

At first every time he thumbed the smoothly blue Smith and Wesson he felt as if he were pushing aside a slim, weightless barrier that yet was too strong for his strength. But as he continued to blast away the ammunition a sense of sureness began to stir in his left arm.

But the thing that would have startled Marcia Carter most was Orn's expression. These days he really looked almost jolly at moments. And sometimes in the middle of fence mending, or cleaning out a spring, or what ever he happened to be doing he would straighten and actually treat himself to a chuckle. This was because he had that wonderful joke that he was storing up for Dude Foulois and the Ghent boys, that skillful little jest that was growing in his arm.

Still Orn didn't have as much time as he would have liked to brood. As summer wore on the Young Bunch grew more and more forward and their raids on the ranches and far-spaced settlements of the Half Moon country grew more and more a thing of custom. They were cunning in their choice of exploitation for they had picked a locality that was more disrupted by private feuds than even most cow countries. The townspeople of Juniper Ridge and Koonha and Fickett hated the ranchers almost as thoroughly as the ranchers hated each other. Orn Medary had a feud with both Foulois' and the Ghent brothers' outfits but in turn there was a good, sound feud between Foulois and the Ghents. It was a fine country for fighting.

As a matter of fact the loss of a few head of stock didn't disturb Orn Medary. He always claimed that his immediate neighbors were just as great cattle thieves as any bunch going. But it was another matter when one day as he was riding fence along the south section he found the dead body of one of his hounds.

The dog, Bill, a big raw-boned animal with strawberry spots, had been gone for almost a week. Orn hadn't noticed it particularly for Bill was more of a ranger than Mate or Suzie. He often went off after coyotes and had been known not to show up for ten days and longer.

For many minutes Orn squatted by the lean body of the hound, longer and leaner and more noble looking in death. The ever-present hungry expression was gone. Orn sat there, smoking, flipping away half burnt quirleys. His mind moved in slow, long sweeps like the shadows of the death pacing carrion crows. Poor Bill had been dead only a

little while. Fortunately the mess of twigs had hidden him.

Squatting there, Orn let his brooding eyes sweep the shimmering, sage-smudged country beyond the draw. Foulois' land—Foulois' work. He had always promised to shoot any dog of Orn's that he found on his land. Foulois claimed to hate dogs.

As Orn sat on his heels there in the deep draw a greater hate than he had even known for Foulois was born in him. He felt that the Dude would never have done this if his right arm had still been good. It was part of Dude's devilish plan of torture.

ONE soft evening some two months after Marcia had gone back to Juniper Ridge, Orn was sitting on his veranda smoking and trying to think. He liked to sit of an evening on the dark veranda with his hounds resting here and there in the shadows and the Half Moon range faint and moonlike in the distance. He liked to think of the surprise he held for his enemies. Of their despair when they learned that Orn Medary could once more handle a gun. He liked to hold these thoughts for they stiffened him and spurred him to make great efforts with that left arm of his.

Yet tonight he couldn't quite keep his mind on the trail of hate. There was a softness over the range, in the sky—the stars were like specks of butter. Orn caught himself thinking again and again of Marcia Carter. From time to time he grew impatient with himself, restless, and tried to put her out of his mind. He told himself that he wasn't like other men to grow soft over a woman. He was wise enough to know that his whole strength lay in his independence. The moment he let anyone mean anything to him he would be no better than the weakest.

So he told himself—with his mouth bent in that bitter, brooding smile of his. He told himself that Marcia Carter did not care for him anyway—yet the thought of her persisted in his mind.

The hounds were restless that night. Orn could hear them getting up, going to the edge of the veranda to stand listening for a while before they sighed and settled themselves down again with many turnings. He thought it was the moon, coming full and liquid over the black hills. If his head hadn't been so full of Marcia he would have told by their movements that something was stirring off on the horizon. As it was, their sudden yapping surprised Orr. He almost jumped out of his chair, bumping his injured arm.

"Shut up!" Orn told the hounds.

He stood there, listening in the dark. People in the Half Moon country didn't travel much after sundown; it might be misunderstood. With his head up he stood listening, *shushing* the hounds out of the corner of his mouth. Little by little the sound of hoof-beats grew distinct in his ears. Maybe, thought Orn, it's my old friend Foulois. Or the Ghent boys. Maybe they've come to settle the boundary trouble once and for all.

Orn shrugged to himself and went in, groping on the table, until he found his holster and cartridge belt. He slipped it on, holding the belt with his stiff right hand and pulling in the buckle with his left.

He knew that he was yet no match for those expert gun-slingers. Still, characteristically, he never for an instant thought of running, or hiding, or backing down in any way.

The sound of hoofs swelled and rose across the plain. Orn could hear the tempo of the slowing horses, as they turned into the lane and then picked up. Deep warning rumbles sounded from the hounds that now stood in a line along the veranda.

Orn wondered if it could be the Young Bunch riding in. They had been getting pretty gay of late. Several ranchers in the outlying country had been surprised and shot down. The Bunch had raided several towns on both sides of the mountains. Maybe they were coming to pay him a call. Three months before they would have hesitated a long while before dropping in on Orn Medary—but times had changed.

THE riders rattled across the bridge and drew up in a tight bunch of jingling, snorting horseflesh. The hounds tipped up their noses and commenced to yap and a rider hailed the ranch-house.

"Medary! Hey there, Medary!"

Orn relaxed his lean, tense body. "Hi there, Sheriff," he called.

The presence of the sheriff made him feel safe. "Wait, I'll make light."

He scratched a match, and twisted up the wick of the lantern, touched the match to its blackened tip. Then he told the hounds to shut up. They looked at him reprovingly from under their wrinkles but they stopped barking.

"Well?" said Orn sardonically, as the horsemen trooped up the steps. "This is sure neighborly."

He gave a start. The lamp, touching the dust-stained faces, discovered one that was softer and finer than the others. Orn met Marcia Carter's interrogative gaze.

Sheriff Larsen let himself into the house and the others stamped after him —Doc Carter, Marcia, Lentz and Cramington, who were two of the ranchers with whom Orn hadn't yet quarreled, and a half dozen townsmen. They found chairs or ranged themselves loosely on the window-sills, glad to be eased of the saddle. By the brick chimney Orn Medary took up his stand, that maddening smile with which he kept the world out, on his lips, a questioning look in his eyes.

"Medary," Larsen started in his slow and heavy way, "We come 'cause we got a proposition to make you."

"Yes?"

"Yup. You been hearing about the trouble the Young Bunch have been making around here. They laid for Dilly Mayes last week over by Rainey and they got him and burnt down his place. That's the kind of thing that's got to stop. That's what we come to talk about to you tonight, Medary."

Orn said: "Someone should have got Dilly years ago. He was sure a disagreeable cuss."

From the corner of his eye he saw Marcia smile, but his remark seemed to take the sheriff aback. "Well, well," he muttered. "Everything's a matter of opinion. Of course, law is law." He raised his hands and put them on his knees and then he bent his ever-serious blue eyes on Orn. "What we come for was to ask you to join the Vigilantes and helps us hunt down that bunch of ruffians."

It came as a surprise to Orn. So they still had enough esteem for his reputation as a fighter to want him to lend his strength and the power of his name. The compliment touched Orn as only few compliments could. And yet his nature, as suspicious as an animal of the open range, made him proceede cautiously.

"Why should I join you?" he asked Larsen, stalling.

Doc Carter, Orn saw, was watching him with an interest that was more than professional, Marcia watched quizzically, and the other ranchers and townsmen guardedly, suspicious of the Orn Medary that might let loose any moment.

"Why should you?" said Larsen. "Why it's your duty. It's the duty of every law-abiding man to keep the range clear of outlaws the same as a sensible cowman keeps it clear of loco weed."

Orn had the grace to smile. "Law-abidin! I'm glad to hear you call me law-abiding, Sheriff."

Sheriff Larsen didn't see the incongruity in calling a man who had shot up several people law-abiding. After all it had always been in self-defense, there was hardly any question about that, and the distinction was as great as the sheriff's mind could handle.

"Sure. You better join up with us Medary. The Dude's agreed and so has Mac and Joe Ghent."

Orn stiffened. "The Dude? And the Ghents? So you've seen them?"

"Sure. Jes came from the Foulois place."

"So," thought Orn, "first they went to the Dude, then they went to the Ghents, the last of all they came to me. Strong men first, heh!"

HE had been all ready to go, all ready to do anything, it was so long since he had been called upon to help. A minute before he had been capable of making a really great gesture if he had been called upon, for deep down, beneath all those layers and layers of bitterness and distrust, was a streak of sentiment such as none had even guessed unless it were Marcia Carter, leaning on her elbows watching him with curious eyes.

Orn drew himself up. Slowly, very distinctly, he announced: "You fellows will have to do all your outlaw huntin' without me. After all," he said, "you have the Dude."

Doc Carter flipped his cigarette into the fireplace. He frowned and there was a disappointed look on his face. He couldn't help liking Orn and he hated to see a man ruin himself. Now he got up and with a shrug of impatience, walked out.

But if Doc Carter looked disappointed, Marcia was more than that. A strange, almost hurt look came over her face. She regarded her finger nails for a moment as if they were things of great interest. Then wearily she rose to her feet.

"Well if you won't, you won't," said the Sheriff.

It seemed to Orn that he could have acted a little more disappointed about it.

The others drifted out with the barest of good-nights. Marcia was last to leave. She stood slapping her rawhide quirt softly against her divided skirt, looking at Orn as if she were trying to make out something there in his face.

He turned his lean head, and unconsciously his voice dropped lower as he said: "The ranch has been real different without you." This was a great concession. What he meant by "different" was lonely and he knew that she would know he meant that. No other woman had ever made him speak that way. Few women had ever made him speak at all.

She turned that even gaze of her's on him. "Orn, I used to think that there was a streak of something fine in you. But I've been kidding myself. The trouble with you is you're *small*, that's all."

He raised his head as if someone had doubled up a rope and whacked him across the nose.

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

Standing very straight, Marcia Carter looked at him and the friendliness was gone completely from her face.

"Just because they went around first to Foulois, your turned them down, didn't you? You had to be the one to be asked first."

Orn made an angry gesture with his left arm. He couldn't see what that had to do with Marcia and him. But the girl went on, speaking with a driving force built up of disappointment. Those last few weeks had been hard weeks for her. She had missed Orn Medary much more than she had intended that she should.

"You know Orn, people have been pretty decent to you. When you were

shot up they petted you and humored you, but it didn't seem to make a bit of difference. You're just a maverick and you'll go on being a maverick to your dying day."

It was as if the girl on the edge of the open door was pronouncing irrevocable sentence. All that she had said was true, Orn knew, and that made him deadly angry. Resentment fired in him. He wanted desperately to make her take it back—to make her withdraw her curse of eternal lonliness. He stepped toward her, his arm before him. There was a queer light in his eyes. But the girl did not give back.

"I suppose," she said, "you mean to make me take it back the way you did that time in Juniper Ridge."

"No!" He knew to what she was referring. "You needn't worry. I'll never kiss you again."

There was jingling outside, and the stamp of restless ponies. The hounds began to bark in sympathy; quick short barks.

"Hi Marcia, where are you? Marcia!"

"Coming," she gulped, in a voice that couldn't have been heard ten feet away. She turned and rushed out the door into the dark beneath the trees, running recklessly for the bunched horses. But as for Orn, he stood in the doorway with one hand high above his head, and a smile, with all the old bitterness and a strange new uncertainty mixed, on his face.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Blind See

SO the Vigilantes rode without Orn, and though the fact gave him amazingly little satisfaction, they failed to have much luck. They combed the plains of the Half Moon and rode into the chapparel-clad foot hills. The outlaws were well hidden. The Vigilantes did find a few head of cattle, but that was all.

One small party led by Sheriff Larsen and the Dude rode deep into the mountains. They discovered a couple of rimrock hideouts but the Bunch had long since left. And so the posse returned to the towns and ranches leaving the sierra to resound to mocking laughter of the Young Bunch far off on the ridges.

Orn stayed on the Flying M, jealously riding his miles of fence and seeing that the water holes were clear and the cattle moving towards fresh feed. But the summer is a bad time of year on a ranch for a man who has something on his mind. In the fall and spring he can ride it off but summer is the nearest to idle that a rancher ever gets.

Orn's contempt for all the world, a contempt that he had always felt and yet not quite been sure of, was crystallizing into a hard lump inside him. The alternate kindness and hurts of the last few months had cracked his hard shell the way a rock, that has been close to the fire, cracks when you suddenly open a canteen over it.

Physically he had never been better. His injured arm had healed perfectly, though it retained the slight rigidity that Doc Carter had predicted. His left arm had become more limber and sure and wise in the ways of guns. It amused Orn to notice that the left hand and arm seemed actually to have increased in size. In a month of two, surely by fall, he would be ready.

At nights, off in lonely line camps or back at the ranch house, Orn never failed to practice drawing and shooting. There was a certain visciousness about this practice that had not been there before the night that Marcia Carter had told him he would be a maverick forever. Somehow now his hate for the Dude was linked up with his feeling for Marcia. More than ever before it seemed as if the whole world alternately petted him, and

threw stones. And this man and this woman, so easy in the world that he was uncomfortable in, were the focus of his hate.

Orn had figured out a cagey device to make up for any slowness in his handling of guns. Instead of the single old-fashioned Smith and Wesson he used to wear down low on his hip, his waist was now crossed with two guns of the same make, and the same weathered, dark wood of the butts. He assured himself that anyone would think that the added left-hand gun was mere show, a camouflage to hide the weakness of his arm. Their eyes would unremittingly follow the right arm, just as they always had, but later on—too late perhaps—they would find it was the newborn left arm that was lying in wait.

And whenever he thought of watching eyes, they were the eyes of Dude Foulois, the man who had been his enemy for years, the man who had saved him from the flood in order to play with him a few months more, the man who had taken his place as the most feared gun-hand in the country. Sometimes, though, when he thought of eyes he thought of Marcia Carter's, and the contempt with which they had regarded him that last night.

ONE day he was riding the eternal line of fence that lay between the Flying M and the Foulois spread. There were some bad places in it where the cattle were always trying to push through to Soda Springs.

He was coming over a bald hill speckled with rocks when he happened to wake from his ugly dreams and squint across the great lap of land that lay golden and dull before him. And as he swept his gaze in he saw a man, dismounted and bending over an object on the ground. The fellow was on Foulois' side of the fence and he was too far off to tell who it was, but Orn made out the mount as the big strawberry roan that Foulois often rode.

Orn straightened in the saddle, trying to figure out what was going on. It looked queer, so keeping a ridge between himself and the cowman, he rode closer. Finally he found a coulee and rode down that and so came out not a hundred yards from the Dude, and still at his back.

There was something in the grass, something in the low tan stubble, but it was pretty hard to tell what. If it had been a little later in the year it might have been a calf, yet it was pretty queer to find a calf that small with no belligerant mother nearby. Orn pushed his reins forward and rode a little closer.

He stopped again. He leaned foreward until the horn stuck deep into his stomach, trying to see. But the squatting man cut off the indistinct animal on the ground.

"Well," thought Orn, and shrugging, reined his horse sideways, and then the thing on the ground raised its head and Orn saw one of his own hounds. He didn't know it but he let out a roar and, gathering his pony under him, sent it rattling down on Foulois.

The Dude swiveled around on his heel. He observed Orn's wild approach without any sign of alarm, just sitting there, watching, one hand on the hound and one hand holding a long skinning knife. When Orn saw the knife he almost went out of his head.

"Get away", he yelled. "Get away from that hound."

He flung himself out of the saddle long before his mount pulled up, hitting the ground at a slant. The hound whimpered piteously and that sound uncorked every bit of Orn's deep-seated wrath. He came stamping down on Foulois calling him every name under the sun.

The Dude's eyes began to narrow. "Say," he drawled, "just take it easy. Take it easy!"

But Orn was past taking it easy. Every bit of his anger was authentic, and he felt justified. Any man that would torture a poor dog . . . Foxie and Mate and Suzie were the only things in the world he was really attached to, the only things he unreservedly understood and that understood him. He could have stood seeing something terrible happen to a man sooner than to one of his dogs.

"Stand up, you buzzard, and I'll fill you full of lead. Stand up, coward, and take it."

Foulois frowned, and his face squared in a look of rage. "Hold your horses. Jes' hold your horses."

"You were the one who got Bill, too, Foulois, I can stand for your crowdin' my boundries, and I can stand for your tellin' tales and all that, but when you start carvin' up my hounds . . . Damn you, reach for that gun of yours. You'll find I ain't so helpless as I look."

"You fool."

Foulois jumped to his feet. His lips, moved, yet nothing came from them.

The old calm had set over Orn Medary, that sort of coolness that had made him so deadly of old. The fingers of his right hand twitched spasmodically.

"Draw, damn you. I won't beg you again!"

"All right," snarled the Dude, pushed beyond endurance, "have it then. You fool!"

Both men dug for their guns. And then something terrible happened to Orn. The habit of years is a many-stranded cable. You can't unravel it in a day, a month, or even three months. Nor can you completely replace it with another thinner cable.

In the terrific rage that blinked Orn's eyes and obscured his mind so that he could hardly think for anger, the call to arms followed the brain's old channel. He found himself going, digging swiftly for his gun, and then his whole mind stopped in horror. And in pain. He had reached with his right arm instead of his left. The old habit was more potent than the new.

And as Orn reached, the swift effort caused the injured muscle to contract, to tie itself into a terrific aching knot that released a gasp of pain from Orn's throat. He never touched his gun, he just stiffened the arm with the fingers spread wide. It was exactly as Doc Carter had warned him.

THE swift, unconscious motion of draw and trigger was so much a reflex to Dude Foulois that he could never have pulled up if he had wanted to. But his eyes had not left Orn's face for a moment and as he saw the swift expression pass—surprise, pain, then utter dismay. A thought too fast for words made him fling his muzzle wide. A report echoed between them— a blow that was so soft that it might have been done by a feather, and yet hard enough to jar him, brushed Orn's side. The bullet went singing away into distance.

"What's the matter now?" snapped Foulois, breathing hard.

"Some kind o' cramp."

"Well, it sure serves you right. I'm fed up with you an' all your damned petty orneryness. If a man don't treat you gentle why you get riled. If he treats you like a white man, that riles you too. What in hell's the matter with you, Medary?"

But Orn was not looking at Foulois face, nor was he listening to what the man had to say. Later it would come back to him but for the moment his eyes were riveted to the mangy hound that lay on his side in the short stiff grass. The forepaw had been neatly spliced between two sticks and then carefully bound with long strips of sacking. Orn's face grew pale.

"What happened?" he said, under his breath. And then when Foulois did not

deign to answer, he cried out, "What happened? I thought you didn't like dogs."

"I don't," Foulois said, gathering his pony's reins.

"She caught her paw in the fence an' you was splicing it," Orn said incredulously. There was real pain in his face. His whole philosophy was shattering into bits before his eyes. "Dude," he said, "I'm sorry."

"You go to hell!" Foulois said, and swung into his saddle and rode as if he were trying to outride himself.

Orn dropped to the dust beside the hound, Susie, put his hand on its soft, wrinkled forehead.

He could look back now and see a thousand incidents in a different light. Foulois had been kind to the dog, and no doubt Foulois had been kind to him when he only thought that the man was rubbing it in—torturing him.

Even worse, he could look back now and see how hard Marcia had tried, had battled to bring him out of himself. His past, his whole life fell about him like a pack of cards. He knew that it was bitterness and his own pesky nature that had cut him off from the friendships and happiness of other people. He knew that if he had been a little less proud and bitter that he and Foulois might have been some sort of friends—and he might have had a chance, too, with Marcia Carter. Looking back now he saw that she had held a chance out to him. A silent, dry sob caught in his throat.

The curse of eternal loneliness was upon him. Orn spent the next few weeks realizing that in all it's full, sad import. As he sat of an evening on his veranda, staring at the last rays caught in the jumbled mass of leafage on the banks of the creek, his feeling of defeat was almost a physical pain. Before, when he thought it had all been forced upon him, this isolation, there had been a certain self-satisfaction in brooding, in thinking of his neat revenges. But now, with the bandage off his eyes, he saw how close he had come to happiness, to the sort of normal friendly life that most men lead. He knew that he could have reached down and swept it up as a rider reaches from the saddle and picks a kerchief from the ground. But he had been blind, that was all.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Young Bunch Rides

THE mail came only once a week to the three roosting mailboxes at the corner of the Flying M and the Ghent and Foulois spreads. There was scarcely ever any mail for Orn but sometimes he went down there to hear the news from Pop Carmer, the mail rider. Pop was better than any newspaper printed.

"Well Pop," said Orn that morning, "what's new?"

"Nothing," said Pop. He always said that. It took off the curse of gossiping..

"Come on," said Orn affably, for he was feeling pretty blue these days. The hounds sat in a long serious row to the right of his droop-hipped pony, occasionally scratching an ear. "Here, have a tailor-made, Pop."

"All right," Pop said, spitting out his chaw. "Haven't had a smoke in a long time. Sort of out of the habit."

"You're sure slow at warmin' up today," said Orn, blowing a smoke ring.

"Well, if it's news yer after . . . Le'me see, you knew Ham Doubleday was foolin' around with another of those loco irrigatin' schemes of his, didn't yer? Building a dam in Cottonwood canyon, figurin' on anglin' the water along the side hills to try an get it to irrigate that prime alkali patch over at his place. I tell you, college

schoolin' sure give folks queer ideas."

"What else?"

"Wall . . . Doc Carter's been runnin' hisself wild all week. The foreman's wife on Foulois' spread been expectin'. Myself, I'm bettin' it don't come for a long time yet. You get one of them women that are late an' they're awful late sometimes."

Orn wondered if Marcia was there too. She was almost sure to be where a childbirth was about to take place.

"Oh yeah," said Pop Carmer in his cracked crescendo, "I got a bit of news that maybe will interest you. Maybe you heard what the Young Bunch's been up to?"

"Guess not." Orn had hoped it was something about Marcia Carter. He had been thinking about her a great deal these last few weeks.

"Well, you ought to have heard. Night before last they came down on Bill Huss' outfit and killed him an' a couple of other punchers and run off some stock. They left a note pinned to Bill's vest what said they were goin' to even things up with the bunch that had organized to get 'em. They aimed to killed off all the Vigilantes 'cause they don't like 'em. Your name was down too."

"Hell, I didn't go after 'em."

Pop Carmer guffawed and the Adam's apple danced in his scrawny throat. "That's the joke of it, heh. They don't know that. They think you was one of the outfit."

"Well, I got to be movin'," and he raised his hand in the elegant salute he always gave and trotted off, the mail sacks—one for out-going and one for incoming—bouncing rythmically.

THE news about the Young Bunch did not bother Orn Medary. He had never lacked confidence in being able to take care of himself except for that one period when his right arm had been out of commission. He doubted very much if the outlaws would act very differently now that they pretended to have a holy purpose than they had when they were out merely to rustle what they could. The thing that preyed on his mind was his own isolation. If the Young Bunch killed Sheriff Larsen or Doc Carter, or even Foulois and the Ghents, there would be plenty of folks who would be sorry. If he was killed everybody would say it was coming to him anyway.

Two nights after Pop Carmer had passed with his parcel of news and gossip, Orn was standing by the sink in his kitchen, washing the dinner dishes. Through the open window he could look out and see the thicket along the creek and in the blue distance, delicate jagged peaks of the Half Moon range picketing the sky. A great fan of amber light hung over the mountains with the blue of the night coming down.

On the veranda the hounds were having one of their restless fits, getting up, lying down, stretching their hind legs and giving restless little whines.

"Hi Mate. Hi Suzie." Orn called softly to them, but they merely turned their dangling ears towards the window, and then back again in the direction of the creek. A frown creased Orn's brow. His own eyes went out to the slanting, interwoven mass of trees and brush. Over there a jay was calling hoarsely. Out of the trees flew a wave of birds, small and dark, and dashed away, flying and soaring, flying and soaring.

"Well now," said Orn, and jerking down a flour sack, commenced to dry off his hands with great care.

He was none too soon either. Out of the fading mass of brush low, slinking forms commenced to move and the hounds raised their noses and set up a terrific uproar.

Orn shoved the door shut and

the hounds through the window. Snatching up his carbine he levered and let fly. The plates in the sink crashed together.

Outside little daubs of light touched up the dusk for an instant and died as if they had never been. Angry lead thucked into the stout timbers of the ranch-house.

"Come along boys!" called Orn. "Come along waddies!"

This was something he knew. For the first time in months his troubles and worries and that biting feeling of isolation were swept from his mind like old cobwebs. Here was a little unexpected company. He fired away, trying to feel out the figures of the outlaws so obscure in the dust. He could tell they were retreating. Then the gun-play stopped.

"Medary! Hey, Medary!" a voice sang across the clearing.

"Here," called Orn. "What can I do for you boys."

"We'll be back, Medary. You can't start nothin' with the Young Bunch, you'll learn that, Medary. Next time we'll fix it so those bell-mouthed hounds of yours don't make so much noise. But we got to go on Medary. We got other calls to make tonight."

"Go along then," called Orn. "An' be sure and come back some time."

Orn could hear the sounds of their mounting on the other side of the creek, and he could hear them ride away. When they were gone he called the hounds to him and rubbed each of their ears and gave each one three prunes out of the box he kept on the topmost shelf above the sink. Then he went out on the porch to see if he could tell which way they were riding.

The night was still. Gun-smoke lent the air a peculiar tartness that reminded Orn of autumn in the hills. He raised his head and listened. The sound of their hoofs came back to him faint, light taps—riding

And suddenly his fingers tightened around the veranda rail, tightened so that splinters cut in. Riding south—riding towards the Foulois spread! There would be no lusty-voiced hounds to give warning. The Dude never kept any dogs around. He did not like them.

And maybe Marcia was there nursing the foreman's woman. Marcia . . . .

ORN ran back into the house. There was a lightness about his movements now that had not been there for a long time. Tonight was the night of reckoning. People had been kind to him—he would repay. All the old debts would be scratched off the books for once and all.

From the peg behind the door he took down the two gun belts and slapped them around his thin waist. Then he closed the window and locked the door. The hounds whined shrilly but Orn paid no attention. He knew that if something happened to him someone would remember the dogs and come to see about them. People were kind, most of them, he knew that at last. Then he reached for his rope and ran down to the corral.

There was a sickle moon and stars and a wind blowing that played with Orn's dark hair as he rode hatless on the tracks of the mauraders. In places their hoof marks showed clearly on the alkali patches of the plain. At times they were lost for hundreds of yards among the blue shadows of the sage. Yet they knew the country much better than Orn had thought they would. They kept to the best, the shortest trails.

"Goin' to call," Orn muttered to himself mockingly.

The big gelding swept the ground under him. Sometimes it stretched long legs in a gallop. Sometimes it dropped into a canter, keeping its hoofs well under him to meet the unevenesses of ground.

Orn rode with his eyes wide open into the night wind and sometimes he bad to blink to drive the tears away. Once or twice he saw faint moving splotches far across the plain—the Young Bunch. It seemed strange that so much desperation could move so noiselessly.

At the end when Orn found himself only two miles from the Foulois ranch and still a good mile behind the Bunch, he gave the black the spurs. It hurt him to do it for the gelding had run a fine race, but he had to. The gelding stretched his nostrils and broke into a painful run. A mile passed and Orn could see the backs of the riders and the rise and fall of their bodies in the saddle. He could see they were approaching the motte of cottonwoods that lay between them and Foulois' ranch-house. It seemed to him that there was a light shining through the trees. Maybe the ranch had been warned.

All of a sudden the black stumbled. Off guard, Orn tried to pull him up but he was too late. He had just time to ease his own fall. If he was hurt he did not bother to notice for the next moment he was up and running.

The Young Bunch had pulled into the shadow of the cottonwoods and dismounted. Their winded animals stood with drooping heads and legs wide spread, but it did not matter for in a few minutes there would be all the fresh mounts they needed. Business-like, they unstrapped their spurs and hung them on the horns and then they left the cottonwoods in a bunch to deploy on the ranch house.

The hail came very loud in the quiet of the night, disturbed only by the blowing of the horses and a cricket chirping back of the corral.

"Goin' to make a call boys?"

Someone swore: "My God, it's Medary."

And on the heels of the words a gun cracked and lead struck with it's imperceptable, yet terrible sound.

Moving slowly, bowleggedly, Orn marched down on the outlaws. Sage lisped about his boots. His right arm hung loose by his side and his left, held close to his body, struck fire at slow, sharp intervals. This was the old Orn Medary—Orn Medary the gunnie. All the coolness that had made him feared throughout the Half Moon country was in his movements. And a new determination drove him on. He moved across the moonlight space towards the bunched outlaws, feeling men drop, hearing them grunt as the bullets told—feeling that nothing would stop him.

Lights and sounds leaped across the night from the ranch-house. Voices called in shrill excited tones. Boots pounded. The Bunch suddenly realized that they were in danger of being cut off from their mounts. They made a rush. Bullets drove them off. Suddenly they gave a great shout as they saw Orn Medary go down. He sank slowly, as if bowing to something that no one could see.

The Bunch—what was left of them, only four out of thirteen—climbed into the saddle and tore away. Men from the ranch house climbed onto the Bunch's own ponies and set out on their trail. But Orn failed to see that part. He was crumpled up with three bullets in his body.

IT was several days before Orn Medary really came to. He found himself lying in a strange, high-raftered room, but with the familiar face and friendly eyes of Doc Carter looking down on him.

"Well, Orn, been up to things, haven't you?"

"Yup," said Orn. "How many slugs this time?"

Doc Carter held up three fingers.

Three, eh. That'll be news for Pop Carmer."

"Don't you think you ought to make him keep quiet?" said a worried voice from some place on the left. It was a voice that did strange, tumbling things inside of Orn. He turned his head for a look at Marcia Carter.

"I've got to look after the other patient," said Doc Carter. "Childbirth comes first, I'm afraid."

Orn paid no attention to him, and Marcia very little.

Finally Orn said, dragging his eyes from her face: "You'll nurse me, won't you?"

"Yes. If you want."

"Will you come back to the Flying M with me the way you did before?"

"Yes."

Orn settled himself down deep. This getting shot wasn't so bad.

"The Dude thinks you did a great thing, Orn. He says you're about the bravest man he ever knew. And the biggest."

Orn's smile started out mocking, and then turned and became gentle, friendly —a new expression for Orn Medary, trouble maker.

"What do you think? Do you think I'm all right too?"

She reached out and put a hand on his hand. It happened to be a sore hand, but she was too overcome to notice, and the pain was too much a pleasant pain to Orn for him to mention it.

"Orn," said Marcia, "I think you're fine."

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At last, the solitary manhunter rode into a notch in a deep canyon. At a small stone hut by the trail-side he pulled up. A dozen rifle-muzzles poked themselves from small windows. Under the shelter of the guns a man lounged in the doorway, holding a gun on the stranger.

"Who the hell are you?" he said.

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The man whom Mossman faced was Burt Alvord, ruthless killer and an outlaw only slightly less desperate than the fabled Chacon. And it was through Alvord that, taking a slender outside chance for his own life, the ranger captain hoped to discover Chacon—and to bring him back to Arizona to hang for murder.

Throughout that night Mossman's life hung by the slenderest thread. At any moment, there inside the stronghold of the bandit, he might have overplayed his hand, and brought upon himself swift and merciless death. His iron nerve, an infallible knowledge of human character saved him—even won him the half-promise of being taken to the camp of Chacon.

It was only after tense, death-freighted hours, that he and the bandit started out for the camp of the dread Chacon. But, curiously enough the reputation of Chacon's for gathering information frightened even such a bravo as Alvord. Before they came within sight of Chacon's hide-out, Alvord refused to go further, and Mossman went on with a guide.

Chacon and another man, in the dead of night, were seated about a camp-fire. Suddenly into the flickering light came Mossman. Chacon, pausing in the act of lighting a Mex quirley, looked up.

"I'll take one of these cigarettes," said Mossman calmly. Chacon thinking no man would have the foolhardiness to walk calmly up to him in that fashion, held out the package. Even then, Mossman judged his time in split seconds. He took the burning brand for lighting the cigarette in his gun-hand, to allay the outlaw's suspicion—and then, his eyes catching a sudden spark of fear in those of the outlaw, he threw down. Chacon, the man who's very name had brought terror and death along both sides of the Rio, was captured. Single-handed, and from a stronghold that even Mexican Federales had hesitated to attack in force.

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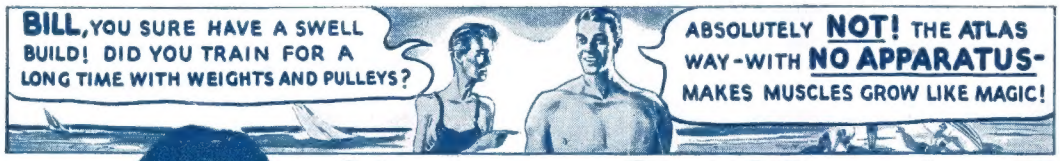
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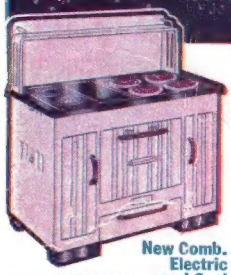

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"You'll be amazed to find how far your pennies stretch. Some stoves cost as little as 12c a day at the FACTORY PRICE—and 18 months to pay, if you wish.

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"In this Catalog you'll see new modern stoves of sparkling beauty—Porcelain Enamel Coal and Wood Ranges in white and delicate pastel colors—new Combination Gas, Coal and Wood Ranges—and something altogether new, *a Combination Electric and Coal Range*. Also new Gas Stoves—Oil Stoves—New Coal and Wood Circulating Heaters—Oil Heaters—Garage Heaters—Furnaces (free plans)—all at Kalamazoo FACTORY PRICES.

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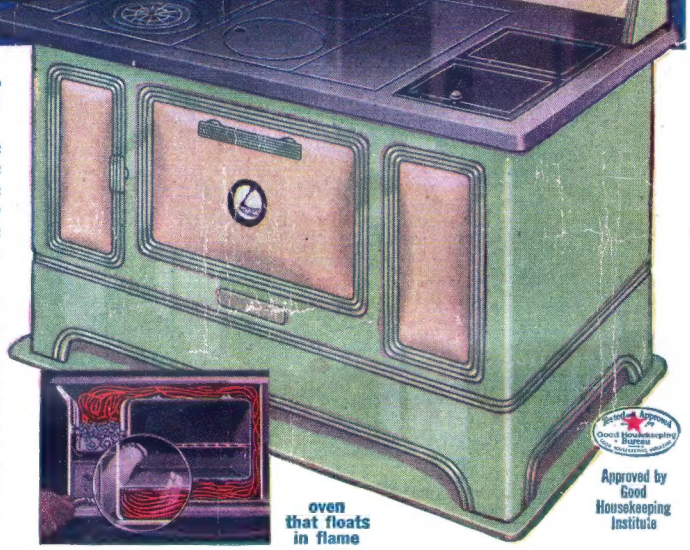
oven that floats in flame



Approved by Good Housekeeping Institute

Coal and Wood Ranges

"A Kalamazoo Direct to You" Trade Mark Registered

KALAMAZOO STOVE & FURNACE COMPANY
493 Rochester Ave., Kalamazoo, Mich.

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